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ERRATUM

Editor: Mona Oikawa

Big Nipple Of The North

Once upon a time in the tropical village of Muñoz, there lived a girl who didn't like dresses. Folks said that even as a baby, the girl had refused to wear any style of female clothing.

Once, when her mom dolled her up in a red polka dot dress, the baby cried all day and night. The infant ran no fever, but her swollen eyes expressed an untold agony and her voice was hoarse from days of ceaseless crying. Her parents felt helpless and finally took her to the village chiropractor.

The doctor quickly put the exhausted infant on the bamboo floor and undressed her for examination. The baby sighed with relief as though he had plucked a thorn from her heart, but as soon as he clothed her in the red dress, she resumed her wailing.

The chiropractor read the baby's pulse and aligned her supple spine. He tossed her front to back and checked her genitals for, indeed, she had female genitals. He found nothing wrong and certified her good health. The baby was wet so the doctor changed her diaper with his son's Pampers for boys. She giggled with delight and an aide rushed her out of the clinic wearing only a blue padded diaper.

The baby's face brightened as she recognized her parents, but when her mom appeared with the red polka dot dress, her hair stood on ends and her eyes widened with terror. She began to weep again as if begging for some intuitive understanding. She could only speak through tears.

Her parents showed her another dress, a yellow tube blouse, but the baby howled two decibels louder than before. Next, they tried to put the native dress on, a white *saya* adorned with stiff U-shaped sleeves. Not only did she scream, but she also threw her arms and legs about.

Then from out of a bag, her daddy took a blue athletic shirt and the baby stopped trembling.

"Goo, goo, goo, goo," she babbled her first words. Her eyes twinkled with approval. The puzzled doctor watched all this unfold and prescribed boys' clothes and shoes for her. He said they were good for her spine, but as soon as the family left, he scribbled some notes and filed the case under Ghosts and Other Strange Phenomena.

Word about the sick child spread throughout the village. One breezy afternoon the elders met under the tamarind tree, concerned that the western settlers had brought the virus which caused the ailment. A hunter said he had seen similar deviations among adults in far-flung and unconquered tribal towns. He added that the baby was merely a young freak and that it was not an epidemic. Nevertheless, they put her on a watch list.

The child performed well in the arts and garnered honours from her school. She was bright and well-

mannered, and got into fits of melancholia only when required to wear a dress during formal occasions. Nevertheless, people still saw her as a freak for now she was growing breasts, but looked and acted like a boy.

Every Wednesday, the girl offered a peso to the saint of despair and attended a novena, praying that the village god would make her breasts stop their growth. At last, they stopped swelling but she realized no prayer could flatten her chest again.

As she had with the pimples on her face, the girl learned to live with this pubescent burden. It seemed that her heart had swollen too for one night in the cold month of December, she disappeared with her female math teacher.

The whole village talked about the incident for weeks. The school administration, although shocked, said they broke no rule. They probably just went away to work on a statistical project. The teacher, known about town for her frigidity, arrived in town with an exotic aura of fulfillment. The girl, imbued with more confidence in life and algebra, headed on to a brighter path.

She attended the university. Yet when she graduated, she couldn't find any work. She passed all written tests but, because she did not wear a dress nor a bra, flunked all her job interviews. She found odd jobs in journalism where there were other freaks slaving like her. She also settled down with a nice city girl.

When she walked the alleys of Muñoz with her wife, men jeered at them. They scornfully asked what they did in bed for their own bored wives wondered why the two women looked radiant.

She grew tired of the villagers' meddling looks but had learned to ignore them. Her own small world sustained her, but she could not plan her future. She gained weight and grew depressed each day. One night in her sleep, a voice told her to go to the Big Nipple of the North.

At first she thought it was another wild dream again about her busty ex-lover from Ilocos. The village seer said no, for that Big Nipple of the North was a place called Canada. A land with rich resources, it was like a nipple that had nursed many settlers to lives of unimaginable prosperity. The people in Canada had survived the land's extreme winters.

"But beware," the seer warned, "many have perished in that cold land, for it is cursed with big taxes. Go find your destiny and be as resilient as the bamboo that thrives on the outskirts of Muñoz."

Before she left, she asked the seer, "If breasts come in pairs, where is the other nipple?" The seer said the Other Big Nipple of the North was a place called the United States.

"But don't go there," he stressed, "for it is infected with a malignant tumour which, if left unchecked, could quietly spread to the Canadian nipple."

Thus enlightened, she went to the Canadian embassy and applied for immigration. On the day of her interview, she wore a tailored suit but she looked like a man and knew she did not stand a chance.

They did not want masculine women in that underpopulated land. They needed baby makers, for as much as Canadians loved to fuck they were not making

enough babies. Her wife got a mascara and lipstick, and made her look like a baby maker. During her interview with the consul officer, she looked ovulating and fertile, so she passed it.

Canada had strict immigration laws, but even bugs could sift through a fine mosquito net. Some of her village's most notorious people were now refugees in Canada. Like the mayor's killer and the textile magnate who ran away with millions of debts, causing the fragile economy of Muñoz to crumble. Also, the witch who enslaved her own children became a nanny there.

When the freak girl of Muñoz arrived in Mississauga, she had fear in her heart, but a vision overcame her when she saw the bi-coloured Canadian flag at the airport.

As the bright and blinding northern sun shone its rays through the flag, the red bars and the maple leaf gradually merged with the white. The banner's colour changed to pink — the rallying colour of radical freaks! She smiled with relief, for she knew she had found a home. She sang and danced towards Church Street, Toronto's gay capital. And lived happily on welfare.

Stone Butch

Mitos wrapped a wet towel around her chubby face as police hurled tear gas at the students demonstrating at the plaza. Her eyes were bloodshot and weepy; her clothes wet and dripping from the fire brigade's attempt to disperse the crowd with powerful waterhoses. She tossed away the placard that read "Marcos — Hitler, Dictator, Puppy;" and ran to the bus terminal near the plaza where she met a fresh batch of protesters shouting "Revolution!" and "Hail the New People's Army!" The anti-riot squad surfaced from all directions, and she continued to run. She took the first bus that hurriedly left the station. She was finally safe, arriving home, shivering wet after several transfers from the province-bound bus. She greeted her partner, Dina, who brought her a towel to dry herself with. Her safe return was met with a warm kiss. Mitos went behind a bamboo divider and timidly removed her wet clothes as her lover took a furtive look.

"Butchy Patootsie," Dina called the cause-oriented burly dyke. "We've lived together for two years. Don't you think it's time you make love to me without clothes?"

"Are you complaining?" the tired dyke rumbled.

"Have I ever left you dissatisfied even if I'm wearing my Jockey?"

"Certainly not!" she answered. "Your undies rubbing against my skin give me rashes. Look!" Dina showed a patch on her thighs which looked like prickly heat. "Take your clothes off, Butchy. I want to see you naked."

"Treat the rinse water with a few drops of vinegar," Mitos wearily suggested, "and my Jockey will turn soft as silk."

"When we started, Butchy," her lover coaxed her, "I was ignorant. Now I'm ready to try anything. Let me touch you, Tootsie. Allow me to give back what you give me."

"Oh, don't worry about me," Mitos assured her. "I don't ask anything from you except to stay." She said she fucked with her brains, so she didn't have to drop naked in bed. Besides, Mitos reminded her, these were pressing times. The country was still under martial law. "We have lost our freedoms!" she exclaimed. "We can't say what we want to say. We can't believe the news. And all you think about is sex!" She went to her desk and wrote a freedom poem dedicated to all political prisoners.

Two years later, Mitos went home to a dark and gloomy place. "Is there a brownout?" she called out to her lover whom she couldn't see.

"Butchy Patootsie," a voice emerged from the bedroom. "I have turned all the lights off so that you may remove your clothes and join me in bed. It's been four years since we've lived together, isn't it time you make love to me in the nude?"

"We have chosen an alternative!" the dyke yelled back at her silly sweetheart. "Your fantasies are driving me mad. I can't even come home to a bright and cheerful house."

"I promise not to laugh," Dina vowed. "Take your clothes off, my Smoochie. Don't you trust me?"

"I have fucked five women before you," the dyke groaned while showing her five fingers. "They never asked for anything more." Mitos reminded her that these were difficult times. The country's foreign debt was staggering, and cautious investors were withdrawing their capital. Brownouts caused by the energy crisis had disrupted the manufacturing sector. "The prices of rice and fish have skyrocketed. The thumb-size bread I dip in my coffee is getting smaller and more expensive. There is crime and lawlessness on the streets and all you think about is sex!" She went to her desk and wrote a speech for a friend who would lead a women's march in the business district.

One night two years later, the dyke was awakened by someone removing her pajamas. She grabbed her molester and found out it was her lover.

"Butchy Patootsie, it's been six years since we've been together," Dina sulked. "Don't you think it's time I see your golden doughnut?"

"Damn!" Mitos bellowed. "I can't even sleep in peace. If you don't stop, I'm going to have my own room built."

"I know exactly what to expect," Dina assured her. "Disrobe for just ten seconds, dear Boobsie. If you think

I will be disgusted and leave you for a man, you're wrong."

"This pussy was only made for peeing," the dyke responded. "Now that you have disturbed me, I have to go to the washroom." Before leaving the room, she reminded her girlfriend that these were oppressive times. She told her women and children were selling their souls. Thousands had taken to the streets to protest, blocking tanks with their own bodies. "We are the world's lowest-paid workers," Mitos continued. "Politicians are buying votes to win. Seventy-five per cent of us live in poverty and all you think about is sex!" From the washroom, she sleepily went to her desk and looked at the pictures of an assassinated labour leader. She would distribute them to an anti-establishment newspaper in the morning.

Two summers passed and the temperature soared to an all-time high. To freshen up, Dina dipped herself in a cool bath and asked her partner to join her. Mitos removed her shoes and socks, then hopped into the round metallic tub.

"Butchy Patootsie," Dina mumbled, "it's been eight years that we've lived together, isn't it time you take a bath with me in the nude?"

"Naw," said the dyke while scrubbing her foot with a pumice stone. "When I finish bathing, my clothes will be clean, too. All I have to do is hang them up to dry." She rose from the tub, hid behind a bamboo divider and changed into her dry clothes.

"Let me brush your back, my Coochie," Dina chided her. "Let me swim inside you."

Mitos, already clothed, ignored her. She reminded her to conserve water because these were tough times. She said the country must face not only political disasters brought about by years of plunder by a ruthless dictator, but also natural calamities like typhoons, tidal waves, volcanic eruptions and earthquakes. "Mounts Pinatubo and Mayon are raging mad," the dyke added. "Illegal loggers are leaving the forests bald. The exhaust fumes and factories are polluting the air. The gutters are stacked with garbage. And all you think about is sex!" She went to her desk and cleaned her gun. She and her fellow insurgents were planning to ambush a constabulary officer tomorrow night.

The ambush was unsuccessful and, in retaliation, the military placed Mitos and her group under surveillance. Two years later, the activist dyke disappeared and Dina looked for her in camps, where political prisoners were detained. She didn't find her pudgy partner who was presumed to have been "salvaged" — summarily executed — by soldiers. A few weeks later, a mass grave of decapitated women was unearthed in a suburban town. Their hands and feet were also chopped off. Dina walked along the rows of bodies that were lined up for identification. She stopped and wailed on one chubby corpse. "Eeekie Yaakee Butchy! Is that you, my Tootsie?" she cried at the naked headless cadaver. "Is it you? Ten years and I don't even have a clue!"

When You're Six

It's midnight and you're alone in bed. You think you see your dead neighbour peering in your bedroom window. Your neighbour has grown large black wings and you get terrified by her sharp fangs. You're shaking in bed. You see her body divide at the hips and her torso flies towards you. Do you scream? No! You are six years old and already, you know you're a butch, because you always wait for the banana fritter girl. You close your eyes and if the creature is still there when you open them, you stare back at her until you frighten her away. You can't be scared. You're a butch! You have to be brave. Someday, the banana fritter girl will entrust you with her life and you can't be a coward. You know that even when you're only six.

You never wait for the fish ball boy or the tofu pudding man. You let them pass and when they have walked half a block away, you call them, "Hoy! Come back!" You know they need money. The fish ball boy grudgingly pushes his cart back towards your house and the tofu pudding man, with two heavy pails of soft tofu balanced on his shoulders, reluctantly walks back to your gate. You never do that to the banana fritter girl. You're always by the window, waiting for her to call,

"Ay, ay maruya!" And you steal money from your Papa's pants to buy banana fritters. Even at six, you like girls.

You can play girl games. Or boy games. Just as playing house is a girl game and when you do it your way, the other girls ask, "Why you always play husband?" And sometimes you mix boy with girl games. With your brother's toy armalite, you barge and shoot at a bunch of girls in the playhouse who always tease you about loving Jose.

"Why you always murdering our girls?" one mother asks.

"I go home and there's no food!" you answer with that bulldog look. You never really belong with girls or boys. You're better off alone. When the other kids laugh at you and call you names, do you run weeping to Mama? No! You've got to be thick-skinned and find other bastardly words for them. Butches can't be bullied, you tell yourself at six.

Sometimes you play rough and hurt yourself. Do you head home howling because you have big boobos on your knees? No! Six-year old butches are already tough. When your wounds ripen and your Mama presses out the pus, do you cry for her to stop? Never! You close your eyes and blow on your wound. When a fly lands on it, you smack it dead. When your tooth starts aching and your Mama tells you the pain will go away by itself, do you hold it against her? Certainly not! The other girls will writhe in pain and cry "Wa-wa-wa" the whole day. You go to your room and make yourself well. You drop perfume into the cavity, lie down in bed and stare at the

ceiling watching the hanging lizard who, like you, sees the world upside down. Your gums and cheek will swell and your breath will be putrid. Your Mama will say she doesn't have money for the dentist but that won't matter. You know that pain will always be your twin because you're different. Being a butch is a pain in the ass. Even at six, you know that.

Sometimes you get to play big boy games. You make friends with an older boy who takes you to his backyard and shows you something. You hold the thing and it feels warm like a puppy's tummy. You wonder if it is alive because it tilts up and down. You touch it briefly and he insists you hold it longer. You run away and he runs after you. He warns you not to tell anyone what he has done, so you suspect he did something wrong. And you run and run. Butches always run away from boys. You know that even at six.

Parents raise boys and girls, but not butches. You're better off fending for yourself. When you let them take care of you, you'll grow up wrong. You'll be a fine woman, curling your hair and slipping a petticoat under your lace dress. You always say no to their ways. You say no to almost everything, so they don't bother you anymore. You can't be like mother. You can't be like father. You try to be bits and pieces of people, like Frankenstein. It doesn't matter if you are raising yourself to be a monster, because butches scare people anyway. At six, you know that.

After it has rained hard and the heavens are roaring with thunder, do you tremble and call your Mama to hug you? No! You have heard louder thunders within

yourself, like when the banana fritter girl tells a boy she's going to marry him when he grows up. You tell her you'll grow faster than him, but she doesn't understand. Nobody understands you. You have learned your ABCs and yet you still don't understand why you're a butch. You tell yourself you're not a butch. Like dirt, it will go away when you take a bath. You scrub yourself with soap and you're not a butch anymore. But when you see the banana fritter girl, you turn into a butch again. And at six, you just let it be.

While reading comics, a lizard dining on a mosquito loses its grip and drops from the ceiling onto the page. It stares at you coldly and wags its tiny tongue. Do you scream and call your Papa? No! Butches don't need daddies to calm their nerves. You get startled, yes. The lizard drops its tail onto the ground and it wiggles as though it has a brain. You have to be fearless because someday you will save the banana fritter girl, who is actually a princess in disguise fleeing a dragon. And at six you're not afraid of the dragon, it's just a lizard gone big.

Your Mama says you can be Julie Andrews, but not Elvis Presley. Do you believe her? No! You wear your brother's jacket and turn the collar up. You put your father's big-buckled belt around your waist and don his black socks which look like Elvis's boots. And you sing "Love Me Tender" for the banana fritter girl. When people stare at you because you're Elvis gone wrong, does it bother you? No! What people think doesn't matter to butches. Even at six, you don't care.

Sometimes you wear a bathrobe and your mom

thinks you're a geisha. You are actually Shintaro, the blind swordsman. You roll up your eyes so only the white parts are seen and you carry a wooden samurai sword. You shout "AIIIEEEE" and do flying kicks while darting out flattened soda crowns to the bad ninjas.

You make an arrow using a needle and a bamboo stick. Your brother struts beside your target — the banana trunk — and gets hit in the cheek. Do you cry when your Papa hits you with a folded newspaper? No. It doesn't hurt but only makes a loud noise. Your Papa knows you're not sorry and he knows you're going to make a slingshot to shoot the birds. You will instead, he warns, hit your brother's eyes. He wants you to be sorry but you're not. He spansks you with his hands. Do you cry? No! It still doesn't hurt. Your Papa knows you are still not sorry. He whacks you with his belt. Do you cry? Almost, but you don't. He beats you with his belt buckle on the same spot and it really hurts. Your bum feels like a burning pot. He knows you are not sorry yet. He knows you will make a flying bomb with a nail and a bunch of rooster feathers attached at both ends of a bamboo stick. When you aim the bomb up into the air, it will explode as it drops because there's a pistol cap at the nail's end. The noise will disturb the quiet neighbourhood. Your Papa gets a piece of long wood and prepares to strike you. Do you cry now? No. But you know it will really hurt, so you run fast before he gets you. Nobody runs faster than a six-year-old butch.

When your Mama sees you scratching your head and says you should not go near the banana fritter girl because she has lice, do you obey her? No! She says those

lice are going to fly and carry you to the big mountain. Lassie has fleas under her paws and inside her ears, and they haven't carried her to the big mountain. Butches are not even scared of dragons. Why should you be with teeny-weeny lice? You tell your Mama that you have lice because your hair is too long. Lice don't live on boys' heads because there is no place to hide or lay eggs. Sometimes you feel lice slurping your blood and shitting all over your head. Sometimes you see them bungee-jumping near your ears, or taking a stroll on your shoulder. You itch to see the banana fritter girl, and you scratch and scratch your head while waiting for her. Butches cut their hair short because girls give them lice. Even at six, you know that.

Since no one plays with you, you bother and tease a stray cat. You call the kitty, "Psss, pssss. Meemeeng Cat. Psss, psss." She turns out to be a butch and bites you. Do you tell Mama you're dying of rabies? No! You're not even supposed to be out. Nice girls ought to be taking naps. And you know you're going to get rabies, and the doctor has to inject your back with rabies shot, nine times. And you take care of yourself, like always. You put a crushed garlic on your wound and keep your mouth shut because butches keep secrets. And they are not afraid of anything, even death. At six you tell yourself, "Wish I were dead. Wish I were dead." And you wake up another day and you don't get rabies. And you wake up still a butch. At first you think you just caught the butch fever because you ate too many banana fritters; that you will be well like the other girls. But you wake up still a butch. And you wake up another day and

you're still a butch. You take aspirin and break it into two just like how Mama does it when you have a flu. And you pulverize half of the tablet with a spoon till it gets powdery, then you add sugar and take it with water. And you wait till you get well from the butch fever. And you wait and wait. And you wake up still a butch. And you wake up another day, and you're still a butch. And you wait for the banana fritter girl. And you wake up still a butch. And you turn seven, and you're still a butch.

Every Full Moon

Remedios opens her eyes and sure enough she's at the corner of San Andres. She travels this route as a bus conductor more than a dozen times daily. Each nook and corner of the city has its own familiar clues. The swift turn as the bus negotiates the sharp curve of the San Andres rotunda. The hurting songs from the jukebox in the beerhouse nearby. She cannot be wrong.

"Thanks, Pard. I'll see you tomorrow," she bids to another bus conductor, also a dyke, who is taking over from her shift.

The bus slows to an unnecessary halt to let her off. Her acrobatic skills have been honed after five years on this job. She can land on her feet from out of a bus's door no matter its speed, she can run fast to catch it if it leaves her behind, and hang like a monkey from its side when it is full. She can hop out from the front to the centre door with athletic grace. Like the newsboys and cigarette vendors who sell their wares on the road by hopping from one bus or jeepney to the next, she lives by her quick reflexes. That she can be pinned down or run over by her own bus or another vehicle is a risk she faces daily.

She is muscular around the arms and shoulders. Her

toughness allows her to bully anyone who will not pay the fare. Her deep voice is put to good use when she yells out the bus's destination. She can squeeze herself between standing passengers during rush hours. No-body escapes her without paying the fare. She pounds once on the vehicle's side to signal the driver to stop, twice to make him go. It's a dangerous job meant for men and butches.

Remedios crosses Taft Avenue and walks eastward to a dark alley. It is a balmy evening and an urge to smoke a mentholated cigarette overcomes her. She sees a small variety store nearby and searches her pocket for some loose change.

"One stick of Kool, please," she shouts.

She cannot see the storekeeper. Several varieties of bananas — ripe and unripe, short and long — hang from the ceiling obscuring her view. Big bags of shrimp crackers, pork rinds and corn chips dim the place. Cheap plastic toys swing from one corner and jars full of candies and bean cakes sit in front of her. A tray of baked sweet rice is covered with wax paper.

The store's front is blanketed by fine chicken wire that keeps petty thieves away. In the counter, there is a small opening, large enough for two hands.

Remedios sees a woman's fair and fragile hand giving her a stick of cigarette. She looks up and sees a smiling lady.

"One peso," the vendor asks.

Remedios hands her a coin. Their fingers meet briefly at the little hole and they look at each other. She drops the coin and it rolls toward a corner.

"Sorry," Remedios apologizes.

She sees the woman now, dressed in a loose duster with a low neckline. Remedios is sure she will see her cleavage when she bends over to get the coin and prepares herself for the show. The woman looks for the coin, holding her neckline with one hand and squatting on the floor with a long stick. Remedios sees nothing but a religious scapular on her neck.

"I'm sorry," Remedios repeats herself.

"It's okay."

"Can you give me two *señorita* bananas and a loaf of bread too?"

She pays her again, this time making sure the money lands securely in the seller's soft hand. They touch longer now.

"I have never been to this store but I live just three blocks away," Remedios informs her. "Some people call me Remy. Others Rambo."

"I'm Julianita," she points to the sign JULIANITA'S STORE, then leaves her customer.

"Your prices are good," Remedios yells. "Better than the store near my place." She gets no response.

Remedios sees a bench and a table near the store. Next time, she plans to buy beer and an appetizer. Anything, just to be near this mysterious woman again. She peeps inside the store, but the woman has hidden herself well. Remedios reluctantly heads home and feasts on a banana sandwich. She thinks about the store woman again and wonders if she is in any way "abnormal" like herself. In bed, she kisses her arm and thinks about her. She falls asleep in her own embrace.

Next morning, she puts a towel and baby cologne in her lunch bag. She wants to feel fresh when she visits the store after the rush hours.

By dusk, she's there. With a towel dangling from her neck, she takes a quarter from her pocket and uses it to knock on top of a jar. An emaciated teenager comes out.

"Where's Julianita?"

"Aunt Nitay went to church. She will be back soon."

"San Miguel beer and pork rinds, please."

She sits on the bench and the youngster goes out of a side door with her order. She gives her a bottle of spicy vinegar for the pork.

"Your aunt — is she married?"

"She's married to Jesus Christ. She should have been a nun."

"A nun!" she claps once, as if sure Julianita is now likely to be fifty per cent queer.

Remedios downs her first beer with jubilation and orders a second bottle.

"We don't encourage drinking near the store."

Remedios looks behind her and sees a towering Julianita.

She stands up and greets her. "It's just a pleasant evening to be out. I promise to be quiet." Remedios sizes up Julianita. She is two inches taller than the storekeeper. The dyke's eyes bulge out to inspect her body, but she doesn't see much. Julianita is wearing a full-sleeved, high-collared and low-hemmed dress. Her ankles are visible, but she has thick stockings on. She checks her firm breasts — perfectly-coned, like two Mayon volcanos.

"You will attract hordes of drunkards to my store."

"I'm not really a drinker. I'll just finish this bottle and go."

Remedios hates beer, but can down up to seven *cervezas* before she feels too bloated. She was initiated into it by men and dykes she befriended. She is queer but she doesn't want to be branded a sissy. That men take to her as a buddy means a lot to her. Besides, girls abound in beerhouses. She befriends cops there, too, the same ones she bribes when her bus driver commits traffic infractions. In clubs operating with police protection, she has seen girls in skimpy bikinis gyrating to the latest bouncy tunes. Then later they go nude atop the customers' tables. There are also stage shows where women bathe each other in a tub on stage and men can hop up and scrub them wherever they wish. In private office parties, she has seen go-go dancers in the raw, dancing on office desks while ogling men give them bananas, coins and paper money to take into their pussies.

She thought she'd seen everything. Live sex shows. A gay man with a spool of thread in his anus weaving a web on stage like a spider. But, once at a birthday party for an official she chauffeured for, she saw another earth-shaking sight. Beer bottles were lined up on the makeshift stage. Men placed as much coins as they could balance on top of the *botellas*. Then, the girls swayed to the music and suddenly swooped down on the bottles and sucked all the coins with their pussies, without even dropping a single coin! What magic! Pussy power! One man folded a twenty-peso bill and secured it on the bottle with a toothpick and lemon from his gin tonic. The

dancer hunkered down and easily scooped up the prize. "Put salt on the lemon!" the official shouted. The men hollered, including Remedios. Nobody could find salt in the office.

Beer and girls go together. Only pale pilsen is available and she finds its taste bitter. Beer makes her pee a lot, too, and frequent the ladies room. The *Ladies Room*. Once, at a nightclub with her father, a bar girl who thought she was a man, screamed when Remedios went inside the washroom. A bouncer almost knocked her unconscious. She could have averted trouble by saying, "Woman. I'm a woman." But she couldn't utter the words. Why she waited for the first blows, she didn't want to ponder now. One blow hit her on the chest and made her shriek, giving her sex away. Her father only said one thing — be careful, next time. She realized that being cautious means swaying her hips and parading her boobs when she enters any ladies room.

"This is not a bar," Julianita explains. "We only sell beers to be taken home. This table is for community meetings only."

"Maybe you can make an exception."

"You can drink inside the store. There is a small table there. Take your beer with you."

"Great. Thanks."

To her disappointment, Julianita never appears again. She buys bananas from Ester, Julianita's niece. Remedios takes a bunch of bananas and puts it atop her like a headdress.

"Between us two," she whispers to Ester, "we'll call your aunt Juanita Banana." Ester giggles.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Remedios bids her goodbye, telling her to look for her if she wants to take the Kamagong-Quiapo bus for free.

The next morning she writes Julianita's name on the bus's dashboard. She tries not to exhaust herself at work for she must still be alert for Julianita's tirade tonight.

She winds up later than usual. When she gets to the store, she sees Julianita and buys a Coke.

"Aren't you going to ask me in?"

"Coke is okay. You can stay outside."

"Then I'll take beer instead."

She gives her a Coke but lets her in. A white man tagging a boy comes knocking at the little door.

"Marlboro, please."

"One pack?"

He nods. He buys a piece of gum for the boy.

"That boy, Toto, is lucky. That generous *turista* promised to build a home for his family," Julianita tells Remedios as the man leaves the store.

"He is not really lucky," she counters.

"What do you mean?"

"Toto is a child prostitute," Remedios remarks with certainty.

"How dare you say such about an innocent boy!"

"Fucking tourists. Fucking bastards."

"Go to the washroom and wash your mouth!"

"Shit!"

"The washroom!" Julianita sends her away. Inside the washroom, Remedios blames herself for swearing. She gets a toothpaste and brushes her bad mouth with her finger. She sees panties hanging by a wire — two

different sizes of them. She takes one that is Julianita's size and pockets it. She goes back to the store, mouth still frothing with toothpaste.

"F-w-uck, shi-w-t, f-w-uck," she blurts out. "W-washing d-w-oesn't work." Julianita sniggers. Remedios returns to the washroom to gurggle. She tallies her score — two demerits for foul language, two points back for a good sense of humour.

"I'm off to a good start," she assures herself. She sits by the table again.

"I'm sorry, Julie."

"My name's not Julie."

"I'm telling you the truth. I know where Toto and the other hookers hang around."

She tells her where Toto and his peers, with the help of pimps, trade their flesh. She has seen him with a European tourist at the side entrance of the Harrison Plaza. She tells her about other brown boys swimming with white men by the pool at the Ambassador Hotel. About frocked Middle East foreigners walking hand-in-hand with young flower vendors in Mabini. She urges her and come to see for herself.

"Then we can go see a movie at the mall," she suggests callously.

"I'm not going any place with you," Julianita smirks. "You are as dangerous as these tourists."

"If you wish, we can take Ester along."

"She has to mind the store. I can't be out that long though."

She succeeds so easily in asking Julianita out, telling

her that her world is too small. They'll meet in ShoeMart at seven on Friday night.

The day comes and Remedios leaves work early. At home, she gets a travel-size Colgate from the cupboard and takes a generous squeeze from it.

"Oh, what a wonderful night! A date with Julianita!" Most of the time, she only uses crystal salts to brush her teeth, but today is *Toothpaste Day*. Sometimes, a soap bar, which leaves a bitter aftertaste will do. Other times, she gurgles with salted water. She looks in the mirror and flashes her teeth. She has always taken good care of her teeth. No woman ever falls for a toothless dyke, she reasons. When her gums ache, she hammers the end of a small guava branch and uses it to sweep away the plaque that has collected inside her mouth. Her sharp teeth can cut a sugar cane in half. She pinches the tube again and cleans her genitals with the mint-flavoured toothpaste and water. She feels fresh and cool.

"Oh, you're so great-looking," she adoringly tells herself as she gently pinches her cheeks to give them a pinkish glow.

"Julianita, I'm yours!" she screams wildly.

She gets a roll of Band-Aids and pastes a strip of it on her left nipple, then her right. She bought a white shirt in Divisoria just for this date. Now she worries the cloth may be too thin and transparent, and that Julianita will be turned off when her nipples protrude out like dice.

She puts on her athletic white shirt and then the fake Ralph Lauren polo shirt. She inhales and her chest becomes robustly smooth.

She looks in the mirror again and winks at herself. If this country has a lesbian star, she is surely "it." She takes her well-ironed jeans and wipes away a cockroach that is sitting on its fly.

"Don't spoil my day *cu'racha!*"

She unwraps the towel on her hips and puts on the size 38 jeans. Oh, they're a bit tighter now. Has she gained weight again? Her tummy seems rounder and she wonders if it is time to deworm herself anew.

She picks up a black hairpin and cleans her ears with its butt. Suddenly she hears sweet music. Her body begins to sway to the rhythm of an imagined tune. She puts her white socks on, then looks at her dusty and wrinkled black shoes with dismay.

"Hopefully, Julianita will just look at my face and ignore my shoes," she comforts herself. She does not have enough money to buy a new pair. She remembers Tasio, the shoe shine man in Paco, and checks her money — fifty pesos. Surely she will still have enough for a movie and snack tonight. She can still spare two pesos for a good shoe shine.

As Remedios leaves her rented room, her landlord's toddler son meets her and wipes his drooping mucus on her pants. She swears. She returns to her room and wipes away the sticky fluid. She runs out fast before the boy can touch her again. Suddenly, she is out in the alley. Her neighbour's two hungry dogs lunge at her, begging for food. She holds their paws before they dirty her shirt. They follow her and she frightens them away by barking like a wild dog. She remembers her fingernails and checks them. They are dirty. She checks her money again.

Five pesos for a manicure. She will still have forty-three pesos for Julianita.

She turns left to an alley of more slum homes. She crosses a wooden plank to a beautician's house. Wild guppies create ripples in the black water beneath the house.

"Elena, I need a manicure."

"Remy, you're so *guapo!*"

"I have a date, but I'm not telling who she is."

"I'll find out in no time."

Elena brings her to a corner, sits and puts a towel on her lap. She takes Remedios's hands and rests them on her knees.

"This place is full of rumour-mongers."

"Why don't you grow the rest of your nails like this one?"

"Oh, you can cut that off," Remedios decides. She keeps her right thumbnail long because it rips bus tickets faster. But it may scare Julianita away.

"Let's try a red enamel."

"C'mon, Elena. I have no time for jokes. Men-style, okay?"

Elena expertly cuts her nails flat the way her male clients want it. She submerges Remedios' hands in water, then brushes them with a pink solution of cuticle remover. She pushes her cuticles backward, then clips them with a nipper.

"You've got beautiful fingers," Elena mutters.

"Candle-shaped artist's hands."

"My best asset."

Elena gleefully turns her hands over and reads her

palms. "You will have a short life Remedios, but you will become rich before you die."

"Elena, I just have enough for a manicure. I can't pay you for fortunetelling."

"Trust me."

"The first time I came here, you told me I'll meet a good rich man and bear him two children."

"Every woman likes to be told that."

"I'm no woman, Elena."

"Then, I will tell you something else."

"Do you see a girl?"

"Ten pesos."

"That much? Never mind."

"We all have destinies we cannot change."

"What good is a long life without a woman?"

"You think about nothing but women, Remy. Prosperity brings with it health and more women."

"I only need one and I will win her tonight."

Elena coats her customer's nails with a transparent colour. She adjusts the electric fan towards Remedios's fingers to dry them fast.

"I read something else. You're going abroad!"

"I'm not going anywhere without my Julianita," she tells the manicurist. "Can you read vibes emitted by objects?"

"Like what?"

"Personal things like panties."

Elena laughs out loud.

"I can't tell the future using underwear! Not my racket, Remy!"

Remedios pays Elena and walks towards the main

street. She perspires and her plastered nipples start to itch. She walks towards Paco and meets the thick smog from the jeepneys. She wrinkles her nose. Vendors rule the sidewalk. She avoids them by taking the potholed street.

Jeepneys line up the road with paid callers announcing each vehicle's destination. Manure from horse-drawn *caritelas* litter the asphalted road. She tiptoes to avoid the heap. A crazy man plays cop and directs the traffic that now flows smoothly. Remedios sees Tasio seated in his corner near a pawnshop's entrance.

"Brochador! What brings you?"

"A shine. Make it look brand new."

Tasio removes Remedios's shoes and brings out a slipper. He brushes away the dust and prepares a black liquid dye. He seems to go into a trance with each shoe he shines, throwing one into the air as if it were a feather, catching it without even looking while he covers it with dye.

Many things about women, besides those she learned from men's magazines and porn movies, she learned from Tasio. Bed tricks like simultaneous anal and clitoral manipulations. Tasio, her drinking buddy for many years now, is her only male link to sexuality. They even lined up downtown to watch those illegal triple-X cuts that were inserted in old films. When she walked along Ongpin, she often wondered what those gadgets were being peddled on the sidewalks. Tasio said they were erection maintainers and ticklers. She didn't have any use for them, but the information seemed important.

Tasio doesn't know she gets hints from him. He has a lot of dirty jokes and sex stories. He calls her *brochador*, one who "brushes" a pussy with a moustache or tongue. Tasio also tells her about games men play with hired women like progressive pumping. A group of men pool their money together and line up for sex with one woman. Each pumps the waiting woman in progression, say twice first, lining up and going inside her only twice. Then four times. Then six and eight, and so on. The winner is the one who lasts. Remedios feels bad she can't join the game for she's not properly equipped. Alone and curious, she tried that trick on her neighbour Rose. It worked! Rose liked being pumped in multiple of threes. Tasio once suggested she'd join Rose and Remedios for a threesome. Remedios jokingly ignored him, saying Rose wasn't going to fall for his black-dyed fingers.

"Any new conquest?"

"I'm taking Julianita out tonight."

"That's my boy!"

"We'll probably see a movie."

"Don't spend a lot. A woman's not worth much."

"I think this is for real, Tasio."

"Take money from women, not the other way around. Remember that, Broch."

Julianita will meet her at the ground level of ShoeMart. She has left Remedios specific instructions that she must not be picked up nor returned home in her company. She does not want to be seen with a butch like Remedios. In

a district like Barrio Taal, neighbours are quick with their moral judgment. Nobody must see them together.

Amidst a crowd milling around a bargain bin, Remedios spots her quickly. Julianita sees her for the first time without her blue conductor's uniform and almost fails to recognize her. She inspects the crowd first and, finding nobody she knows, greets Remedios.

"It's still a bit early. They'll be here at around ten," Remedios announces.

"Ten! I can't stay that late."

"We can shop first. Then we can have noodles and pork dim sum at the fastfood."

They walk a meter apart. Julianita calls Ester at the pay phone and advises her to close shop early. They walk again and whenever Remedios comes an inch closer, Julianita moves two inches away. They walk aimlessly. When they reach the entrance to the movie house, their eyes meet.

"Maybe —"

"Okay."

Remedios goes to the ticket counter and asks for loge seats, the darkest and most expensive section of the movie house. Julianita follows her to the stairs.

"I can't see anything," Julianita whispers to her.

"Let me guide you," she says, holding her gently by the hip. Julianita slaps Remedios's hand and lets her go ahead. She trails behind holding Remedios's shirt. They go to the upper section. It's not too dark, but here they can be alone. They sit and settle down for a while.

Remedios pretends to be uneasy and widens her boundary by moving her torso and arms toward Julia-

nita. Any tiny bit of flesh she chances upon — like Julianita's elbow, arm and hand — brings untold pleasure. Any skin suffices for now. Julianita is quick to parry her companion's sexual advances, and the dyke eases up for the meantime.

A bed scene comes on the screen, embarrassing the religious Julianita. She disapprovingly looks down. Remedios rests her hand on Julianita's knee. She inches it upward, but Julianita firmly holds her hand in place. Remedios shows her other free hand, gesturing naughtily that she is about to aim and grab another part of her sacred anatomy. Julianita seizes that hand and locks it with the other one. With both hands occupied, Remedios struggles amusedly. At one unattended second, she kisses Julianita's lips.

"You are not going to do that again."

She kisses her again, and Julianita takes off her sandal and threatens to hit her if she makes a third attempt. Remedios sorts out her mixed feelings.

"I love you, Julianita," she whispers to her. Her object of desire pretends not to hear her during the rest of the screening. Her body becomes as stiff as the chair she's on. She wants to leave Remedios behind for assaulting her chastity, but something pins her to her seat.

Remedios kisses her again on the cheek. Julianita perceives it as a lesser offense and just smirks.

The movie ends and Julianita races out. Remedios follows her quickly. She sees Julianita entering the washroom and she waits for her by the door. She has a strange fear of ladies rooms. She wishes there was another washroom somewhere between the men's and ladies' for

queers like her. Most of the time she holds her pee — sometimes as long as half a day — until she finds a washroom where the users are familiar with her. Strangers take to her unkindly, especially elder women, who inspect her from head to toe.

Julianita comes out freshly groomed making Remedios fall more deeply for her. She ignores her date and heads hurriedly for the exit. They take an escalator to a lower level.

"They're here!" Remedios points to a nine-year-old boy smoking a cigarette with a girl.

Julianita looks at two children walking invitingly like adult sex midgets. The girl is wearing a halter dress. Her chest is still flat but her voluptuous pose more than makes up for it. Two more boys wearing long pants are standing near the mall's side entrance. One lad, who looks younger than Toto, keeps a thick wallet inside his jean's back pocket. He is as tall as any ten-year-old kid but his gait belongs to a goon about to punch someone. He knows this is his turf, a playground for a different game. Remedios envies the way he carries his athletic shirt, but keeps her thoughts to herself.

Julianita stifles a tear. She watches them with sympathy and prays for their places in heaven. Without question, these kids have been robbed of their youth. She wonders about their future, while simultaneously feeling embarrassed for herself. A forty-one-year-old spinster, she has chosen the path of single blessedness. These kids could have been her own, except that she has never shared a bed with anyone. She has not known sexual pleasure in her life and has never acknowledged

such needs. How could kids so young have so much carnal knowledge while she had none?

"These kids know a lot," Remedios informs her as if reading her mind. "They know oral and anal sex. The penis sizes of different nationalities."

"Your mouth, Remedios!"

"A nine-year old bled to death because a vibrator got stuck inside her," the dyke continues. "I read it in *People's*."

Julianita wants to ask what a vibrator is, but she squirms at the thought. She stares at Remedios who is looking at a shoe shop window. She wonders why she persistently dogs her. She looks at her sandals and remembers how she had hit two aggressive male suitors before. She hates Remedios for taking her threats lightly, and herself for not being determined to whip her away. She is surprised that she finds Remedios's advances tolerable and funny.

She scrutinizes her with new eyes. She sees her worn-out but well-shined shoes. She pities her, a hardworker who earns so little. She inspects her broad shoulders, the breasts she tries so much to hide, her clean ears and fingers. She smells her cheap cologne and records it in her mind. While Remedios was kissing her inside the movie house, her breath smelled sweeter than the panting of the moustached guys she dated in her prime. Julianita feels an irresistible urge to poke Remedios's potbelly to see if it is hard like her father's. Some of the dyke's manners leave more to be desired, Julianita figures, like the way she unknowingly tucks dimes in her earlobes as if they were coin keepers. She

also notices the dyke's habit of spitting sideways when she talks to her.

"You need new shoes," Julianita surprises the blushing Remedios.

"I have another pair, but I thought black would be neat for our first date."

"Keep five pesos a day and you'll save enough for a new pair next month."

"Got to keep away from your store. I spend too much there."

They pass by the fastfood section and find it closed.

"We better have dinner at my place," Julianita offers.

Remedios feels relieved about the money she will save.

"I'll walk you to San Andres. Then you can head home alone — as you had wished."

They reach the corner and Julianita crosses the street first. Remedios follows her a good distance from behind. Once in the perimeter of Barrio Taal, they pretend not to know each other. Remedios gives her ample time to prepare a meal. The store is closed and when Julianita's neighbours have retired to their homes, she knocks lightly at her door. A sleepy Ester allows her inside.

"Juanita Banana?"

She is led to the kitchen where Julianita is preparing a soup of dried fish, ginger and chayote. Remedios's mouth waters in anticipation of a good hot meal. For the first time, she forgets about having sex with Julianita.

"Surely you've got other skills."

"Huh?"

"Ever wished you worked somewhere else?"

"Some good jobs are not for me. I can't wear an office dress."

"What did you want to be when you were small?"

"To be with my own woman."

"I mean work?"

"Once I thought about being a gynecologist because of my fascination for anything vaginal."

"Your passion should not rule your life."

"I don't know what I want to be, but what was clear even when I was a kid was wanting my own woman."

"You've had women before?"

"Oh huh."

Remedios follows her to the dining room and sits at the table's end. Julianita lights up a mosquito coil and hangs it by the mouth of an empty cola bottle under the table. Remedios slurps her soup and Julianita gestures her to be silent. Three bowls of rice go fast. She is a hearty eater and consumes, Julianita calculates, twice as much as she and Ester combined. She wonders if nursing a watchdog puppy will serve her better in life than feeding this bull dyke.

"I'm pretty much from the south too," Remedios bares her origins. "My grandma used to cook the same soup."

"We use a lot of coconut, but I didn't have the time to shred and milk them."

Remedios tells her about her father, a war veteran, whose one child was entitled to a college scholarship. He opted for his son to use it. A girl, his father said, didn't need higher education and a dyke like Remedios, didn't need any at all.

"My eldest brother blew the scholarship and my other brother was not interested," Remedios relates. "I could have been a doctor now, building a seven-mile bridge by stringing together all of the vaginas I have seen."

The night advances and Julianita yawns. She must sleep soon, she apologizes, for she must go to the market early to replenish her stocks. Remedios holds her hand but she breaks loose. She knows she will try to kiss her again, now that Ester is asleep. She moves away from her and bids her farewell.

"Goodnight," Remedios blows her a kiss.

The next day, Remedios writes "Remedios & Julianita" on the bus's ceiling. When the bus is stationed near Quiapo, she buys some sampaguita garlands and rests them on the feet of the reclining statue of Jesus of Nazareth. She offers her best intentions for Julianita and rushes back to the bus.

On Julianita's birthday, Remedios gives her a box of panties amazing her loved one for knowing her correct size, style and brand.

Remedios asks Julianita out many times, but she always declines her offers. Now she buys cheap movie magazines and gives them to Ester. Remedios knows those same magazines will be read by Julianita. The juicy gossips and scandals about the movie stars and their new films will surely make her check a new movie someday. In due time, Remedios believes she will be able to persuade her to go out with her again.

"Do dykes menstruate?" Ester asks curiously one night.

A stunned Remedios looks around before answering.
"Yes. Every full moon."

She tells her that a butch walks, most of the time, like she is carrying a block of stone on her shoulder. Remedios bends her back and pulls her chest inward, then demonstrates it by strutting around the store in big heavy steps.

"When you see one walking like she is burdened by a big stone between her legs, that's when she's menstruating."

"I never see you walk that way."

"Oh, believe me, it's a heavy stone to carry."

One day, a young starlet commits suicide and gets full coverage in the tabloids and magazines. She is a fourteen-year-old Amerasian kid whose mother worked near the U.S. base in Olongapo. She has done nude scenes in movie flicks. She is billed as Pepsi, one of the "soft drink" girls.

An agent had run out of screen names for all the young girls knocking at his door, dreaming of stardom as a way out of poverty. So he started naming them after brand name colas and sarsaparillas. Thus were born the starlets Coca Nicolas, Pepsi Paloma and Sarsi Emmanuelle. Some girls he named after sardines.

Remedios, Pepsi's fan, comes to the store carrying a tabloid that details her suicide. She is tearful and regrets she never saw her in person. Remedios describes her as a classic beauty. She is convinced a lesbian lover would have made a difference in Pepsi's life.

"I should have knocked on her door," Remedios rues.
"I should have saved her from her miseries."

"They're showing her last movie," Julianita says. "I read about it in a magazine."

"I didn't know you read those sleazy magazines."

"Ester has taken to them lately."

"Do you want to see her movie with me?"

She hesitates, but says yes. She is curious about Remedios's description of a classic beauty. She is at her midlife. Isn't she classic too? They'll meet at the mall tomorrow evening. Unknown to Julianita, Remedios has already seen the movie twice.

Remedios meets her at the shoe store wearing a black shirt in mourning for Pepsi. She warns Julianita to ignore her if she catches her crying during the screening. They walk together now and a lector from Taal Parish Church greets Julianita.

"I want you to meet my cousin," the spinster introduces the dyke. "She helps me around the store."

Remedios greets her warmly. Julianita trades mass schedules with the lector and bids her goodbye.

"Now, I'm part of the family," Remedios winks.

Remedios buys the tickets and takes Julianita by the hand to the loge section of the theatre. She opens her bag and brings out some cut green mangoes and a packet of sauteed shrimp paste. They know such foul-smelling delicacies are banned in the theatre, but they feast on them just the same. Remedios puts her arm on Julianita's backrest, then slowly on her shoulders.

She kisses her lips and Julianita freezes. She tries to thrust her tongue inside her mouth, but Julianita guards

it closed. Their teeth meet and make clicking sounds. Remedios forces Julianita's mouth open and kisses her passionately. The spinster responds awkwardly by biting hers lightly. Remedios opens her own mouth so the spinster can explore it. Her hand grabs Julianita's breast, but she begs her to let it loose.

"Not here," she implores.

She stops patiently and pulls Julianita closer to her. Her arm still around her, she kisses her longer. They miss much of the movie's highlights. A guard comes flashing his torch at the audience and the pair behaves for a while. Julianita turns soft and warm. Remedios cries, not from Pepsi's histrionic acting, but from joy and relief. She has only dreamed of this moment and now it is here.

"Can I walk you home?"

"Come after midnight."

Remedios walks her woman to San Andres, then stays behind until Julianita has safely crossed Taft Avenue. The dyke goes to a beerhouse to kill time. It's three more hours to midnight. She walks over to the jukebox and checks out the mushy songs. Most music meant for extramarital affairs goes well for lesbians too — the secrecy and pain of falling for the wrong person. The league also includes women enamoured by Catholic priests whom they couldn't marry. Such songs become instant jukebox hits. She feeds some quarters into the slot and plays a bunch of sad music. One of the songs is her favorite, "Why Should I Be Ashamed?" She puts herself in a romantic mood and prays Julianita does not change her mind. She leaves before midnight and walks to Julianita's store.

Remedios closes the door behind her. Julianita, who has freshened up in her flannel sleepwear, smiles nervously and yawns. It is way past her bedtime.

"Are you sure you've eaten?"

"Been to the beerhouse," Remedios replies, trapping Julianita between her and the wall. "I'm hungry for something else."

Julianita wraps her arms around herself to guard her breasts from Remedios. She resists her kisses again. She sits down on the floor and cries.

"I can't."

"Please."

"I'm afraid."

"I'll be careful."

"Do we have to?"

"I can wait but..."

Remedios kneels before her and massages Julianita's knees in circles. Ticklish, Julianita giggles even as she cries. The dyke kisses her again, wiping Julianita's salty tears with her tongue. She blows her trapped passion into her ears and Julianita's body softens and almost falls to the wooden floor. She stands up and heads for the bedroom. Mayflies dance around a low-wattage bulb that lights the room. Remedios follows her and closes the door behind her.

"The light, Remedios. Turn it off."

The dyke loosens her belt. She lifts the mosquito net and carefully tucks its hem under the mattress. At the edge of the bed lies Julianita cowering under a sheet. Remedios removes her shirt, leaving only a sleeveless underwear. She unzips her jeans but leaves them on. She

slides under the sheet and turns over, facing Julianita. She rests her head on Julianita's chest and gets bumped by a stiff bra. She laughs, her left hand crawling immediately to remove the "deadly weapon." Her hand finds the spinster's breasts while the other tries to undress her.

"The door, is it locked?"

"Don't worry."

She lets Julianita keep her clothing but lifts her nightshirt over to kiss her breasts. They are as firm as a young woman's. She hungrily sucks them, sniffing each of her tits into her nostrils. Now perspiring, she throws away her jeans. She teasingly bites her nipples and mouths her right breast, bringing it north, south, wherever. Remedios tries to part Julianita's legs, but she adamantly refuses. She coaxes her gently, massaging her inner thighs. Losing her patience, she forces them apart and wedges her solid body between her. She goes down on her.

"Don't remove..."

She kisses her pussy. Not actually the pussy but the panty over it. Julianita's wetness has seeped through the cotton underwear.

"You can kiss me but don't remove..."

She presses her nose against her underwear.

"Don't remove..." Julianita grabs the garter up.

With her teeth, Remedios pulls off her beloved's panty.

"Don't!"

Immediately, her face gets drawn into Julianita's pussy like dirt to a vacuum cleaner. Ashamed, Julianita

covers her eyes with her arms. Then she takes a pillow to bury her face. She quivers, then stops. Shakes again and sighs.

"Stop, Remedios! Enough!"

Remedios goes up to face her. Julianita takes the sheet and wipes her own wetness from her lover's mouth. Remedios slides down again, kissing her breasts, then her mound.

"That's enough for one night!"

"I want to go in."

"Don't put your finger..."

"Sssshhh."

"Don't put..."

"Take a deep breath."

"Aaaah...painful."

"Sssshhh."

"Don't move. It hurts."

"Sssshhh... I love you."

"Don't move. Please"

"Good?"

"Painful."

"Relax. Take a deep breath."

"Araykupu! Oh, God!"

"I love you."

"I'm dying!"

"No, you're not!"

"Remedios, don't leave me," Julianita cries.

The dyke kisses her breasts again.

"They're small. Do you like them?"

"I'll make them big!"

"They're yours. Only yours."

Remedios prepares for a second bout, but Julianita stops her.

"What about you? What do I do?"

"Don't worry."

Julianita inquires about Remedios's other women and what they do to her during sex. Remedios says there's no rush and she is going to find out by herself in due time.

"It's almost time to go to the market. I have to sleep."

"Do you want me to go with you?"

"You will be tired. You still have to work."

"Can I sleep here?"

Julianita shows her a wooden couch outside the bedroom.

"Ester will be up soon."

The butch puts her pants and shirt back on. She kisses Julianita to bed. She closes the bedroom door and lies down on the couch. Before closing her eyes, she asks herself if she was Julianita's maternal or paternal kin? First or second cousin? She must find out tomorrow. Once she emerges from Julianita's door in the morning, the neighbourhood will be abuzz with talks. While gossips never bother her, they will scare the fragile Julianita. She must protect her. She wants to go inside the room to ask Julianita how they are related, but she hears the screeching of the rusty bed springs in Ester's room. The roosters are crowing. Later today, she will paint her name and Julianita's on the bus's rear window for all to see and guess.

The Lesbian Hen

One could tell the sex of a chicken very early. If an egg was long and oval, it would be a rooster. If it was round and short at one end, it would be a hen.

One day during a solar eclipse in the province of Camarines Sur, a chick hatched from a round egg and declared herself a rooster-to-be. The whole farm of chickens laughed at her pronouncement. They were known for their cowardly ways, but it was due to this timidity that they led carefree and happy lives on earth. When they found something to laugh about, they celebrated the occasion with much gaiety and made a fiesta out of it.

The chick came into the world surrounded by scorn and prejudice. She tried the way of the hens first, but in her efforts, lost most of her feathers. The harder she strived to be a lady, the less fluffy she looked. Her exhausted body drained up by living in pretense. She then vowed to be a dyke hen at all costs, even if it meant a life of misery.

Roosters of all colours and breeds paraded in front of her, trying to woo her and change her ways. Every morning they crowed in a contest to win her. "Tak-Ta-Raok! Taaak-Taaa-Raaa-Oooooook!"

Beneath all the crowings, Dyke Hen could only hear, "Fuck, fuck, fuck." She could read their motives and was not interested. In their contest, the roosters lost their voices from all the crowing and decided to stop.

Despite her hatred for them, she wanted in some ways, to be a rooster. She loved their feathers and wanted to wear them. She longed to have their hackle for a tail, instead of the short one she had. She aped their arrogant ways and dreamed of wearing their enlarged crown as a hairdo. She envied the way two roosters confronted each other as they do the tae kwon do. Their elaborate flight up a fence to a waiting hen. Their vain ways with their colourful feathers. And yes, she craved for their women — the hens.

After sporadic cockfights, which broke out every now and then at the farm, she would collect all the feathers on the ground when nobody was looking. At night, she strung them together and made a vest for herself. She put some ointment on her crown so it would grow bigger. She massaged her spurs so they would grow and look dangerous. Everyday, she wore her rooster vest. She had big hips like the other hens and looked like an alien fowl.

She was not an early-riser like the roosters, but when she awoke she would jump over to the lowest fence because that was only as far as she could get with her big hips. She vigorously flapped her wings, but she could only crow like a finch with a cold. The other chickens laughed at her vain efforts. Then she heard about steroids that are fed to cows in the beef department. She started stealing and taking them. Not only did

she begin to crow like a young rooster, she also grew muscles around her shoulders and wings like the Austrian cock Arnold Schwarz Egger. She also stopped laying eggs.

She became popular with some hens, and they donated their eggs to her so the farmer's wife would not be suspicious. Every morning, there were always eggs beneath her. The farmer's wife liked her so much since, due to overdonations, she usually had more eggs than the average hen. Humans were easy to fool anyway.

The farmer's wife named her "Helen," to which she did not respond. When the woman called her "Troy," she flapped her wings like an eagle and flew around her head.

Now that Dyke Hen looked like a rooster, the cocks lost interest in her. Her life revolved around hens and pleasing them.

There was one hen that she dearly coveted. She was organic like herself and preferred natural grains over feed formulas. She was vegetarian, too, for she would not touch the worms and insects the roosters offered her. They shared many things in common like going for a dust-bath after breakfast and watching the sunset before retiring to the barn. The hens' sleeping quarters were not far apart, and sometimes Dyke Hen looked at the "chick" lustfully. The other hens were forever engaged with mindless chatter, but her loved one always meditated quietly atop her eggs.

When she woke up late, Dyke Hen crowed sonatas for her and, in the evening, amidst discontented and sleeping roosters, she serenaded her. Soon Lady Hen started to like her, too, and wrote poems for her. Like:

*You don't have to be a rooster,
You don't even have to try,
I don't need long cock feathers
When your wings are just as good.
I love you just the way you are.*

Later, she moved in with her and they lived contentedly. Dyke Hen stopped taking steroid feeds and wearing her rooster coat. She started to lay eggs again. She felt uneasy, but she didn't mind because Lady Hen was always there beside her. Unlike the other hens, she juggled her eggs and played with them like soccer balls. She broke many of her own eggs in the process.

Since she was not a rooster, the eggs which both of them laid were not fertilized ones. Lady Hen had strong maternal instincts and longed to see the day when chicks would follow her around wherever she went. The two hens talked about it. Dyke Hen suggested a one-night stand with Big Cock Silver, the prized rooster in the farm.

"No, no, no," Lady Hen shivered. "I could not stand a rooster feather touching me." She puked.

Artificial methods would require human participation and they chickened out on that one. They decided to adopt eggs, instead.

A well-informed Dyke Hen read that one out of ten chicks born on the farm, eventually becomes gay or lesbian like themselves. Armed with this figure, the duo went around the barn asking chicken couples to give them their tenth egg. Times were hard for raising chicks, so they readily gave their tenth eggs away. The pair carried the eggs very carefully to an abandoned barn a

mile away. When they collected twenty eggs, the hen couple sat on them day and night. Dyke Hen sometimes got bored and suggested an incubator but Lady Hen preferred the natural way. Then came the jubilant day when the chicks hatched out of their eggs. They were all pink and healthy.

Lady Hen paraded proudly with her twenty chicks across the farm while Dyke Hen worked hard collecting food for their big family.

The chicks became hen-roosters or rooster-hens, as fate wanted them to be. They knew from the start that they were different, but were proud of their sexual orientation.

The gay roosters made fabulous gowns of hen feathers for themselves. Others started theatre groups with their brothers where they wore duck, turkey, goose and other costumes. Sometimes they wore no feathers at all, as Chickendale dancers. A few strutted around the barn with dog chains and leather jackets which they got from the tannery nearby. Unlike other roosters they were not interested in engaging in fights but only screamed at each other. They could not understand why roosters would want to kill each other in such a bloody way when they could just sleep together and die in ecstasy. Others volunteered to sit on their sisters' eggs.

The lesbian hens, on the other hand, organized themselves in a different way. They formed collectives for hen rights. They taught each other tae kwon do to protect themselves against rooster rapists and hawks who stalk and attack them at dusk. They held vigils for hens who were killed, stewed or roasted in their prime.

The chickens declared their birthday as Gay and Lesbian Pride Chicken Day. In celebration, they organized meetings and shows which culminated in a parade. Heading the march were Lady Hen and Dyke Hen, followed by their twenty chicks. They whistled, clapped and flapped their wings. "We're here. We're queer. We're not going away!" It was the merriest day on the farm.

Innocent Lust

The day before I emigrated to Canada, I knew there was something else I had to do. I had packed my bags, two nylon suitcases weighing thirty-five kilos each, containing a little of everything I had accumulated in thirty years. I could not bring excess baggage for I didn't have a place to live and had \$400 to live on until I found a job in Toronto.

I spent my last days figuring out what to bring. What I could live without and what not. In the end, I realized it was my lover whom I wanted to pack with me to Canada.

In the Philippines, it was difficult to go abroad. Most embassies would not issue a travelling visa to any Filipina until they were sure she would return home. Many sought the greener pastures, refusing to come back to a country of poverty, crime, violence and injustice. Ironically, many escapees also became willing victims of the same atrocities in another land.

My lover had applied as an independent immigrant to Canada but she could not get through. I was lucky. Although her heart would weep, I knew she would send me off warmly. A Filipino never grieved for another who managed to escape the political turmoil in our country.

No explanation was necessary. It was a common suffering that many of us sought to get away from, someday. Tomorrow, it would be my turn.

My lover and I had lived together for three years, but I knew she must selflessly let me go. There was no other option. We both wanted to see the world that our parents and ancestors never saw, and earn the dollars they never made in their lifetimes. My mother and brother pooled their resources together for my fare and pocket money. My father offered beer for my *despedida*, a farewell party. Friends embraced and kissed me like they would never see me again. I felt like a tourist trapped in an immigrant's body. I just wanted a holiday but everybody was driving me away. It became clear they did not want me back and that my purpose was to pave the way for them when their own departure came.

My immigration papers were ready. I had to say goodbye to more friends and ex-lovers. I remembered disheartening separations from two straight women with whom I'd had devastating affairs. I could not call them up, for they would not care. Besides, if my lover found out, she would think I was being silly. I had been faithful to her all these years and I did not want her to worry now that I was going away. I crossed out their names on my list.

There was one person left to call. She was not a lover, and we were never intimate. Thinking about her still sparked an arousal in me; however, I never knew what she felt about me. In my early teens, only my eyes revealed my lesbian spirit and very few people could read eyes.

We went to a Catholic high school in Manila that believed in the segregation of boys and girls. The nuns handled the girls. At that time, I felt more like a boy but had to go through lessons on crocheting, embroidery, needlework and weaving. I brought my projects home for my mom to finish. I wished the nuns would let me work in the boys' room — doing woodworking, drafting, mechanics and leatherwork.

But segregation was the rule. We could not even mix with the boys who came in the afternoon. Just before they arrived, we would have to be out of the classroom. Before they started classes, we hurried down the stairs. Some of us wore shorts underneath our pleated blue skirts, fearing the boys would see our panties as they peeped from below through the slits between the stairs. My classmates never knew that, sometimes, I also sneaked a look at their underskirts. Well, there was really not much to see. Mainly legs and dark crotches.

Gigi, the person I wanted to call, joined our high school class in our junior year. The other girls and I had been classmates for almost a decade, some of us since our kindergarten days. Suddenly, a beautiful stranger appeared in our class. Nobody gave a damn except me. The other girls were just like my sisters.

The wide open windows brought cool air, but I perspired profusely. She freshened the air with an enchanting aroma I had never breathed before. Her nearness made me shiver.

She came from an elite Catholic girls' school. She was slightly older, just a year or two maybe.

Each time I looked at her, I felt a surge of innocent

lust. She had skinny arms and a fully developed figure. We wore thin polyester white blouses, so the nuns wanted us to wear chemises over our bras. Gigi did not wear a chemise, just a bra which I wanted to unhook. Suddenly, this intruder filled the fantasies I usually vented on my female teachers.

In the classroom, the teachers grouped us alphabetically. Outdoors, we lined up by height. I was almost as tall as she was so she was never far from me.

Soon I was telling her jokes that she liked a lot. It was not hard, for I was a natural clown. With her, however, I always felt I was running out of gags. I did not call her Gigi but I christened her Kiki, which in Pilipino means vagina. She endeared herself to me and I called her Ki. Soon others called her the same name, but she did not mind being called Vagina. She had a game soul.

Her thick black hair had a natural curl which I liked to roll around my young lesbian finger. She often enticed me with her round brown eyes, and I would turn to stone. Her cheeks had a pinkish glow, and her lips were full and inviting. I wanted to kiss her but I was afraid.

I felt her force inside of me. She was in my mind at school and at home. Never before had I worn such flawlessly shining shoes. I mended the holes in my socks and put elastics on them so they would not drop to my ankles, for I thought that one day I might remove my shoes, maybe my clothes, in her presence. I saved money and went to the salon for haircuts. I asked my cousin to check my hair for dandruff and lice. The more I thought about her, the more I felt inadequate.

Sometimes, I phoned Ki for all the wrong reasons —

assignments, projects, boys — but never about what I felt for her. Soon I became her confidante.

She told me her parents were separated. In the Philippines, there was no divorce. Kids who were illegitimate and came from broken homes bore stigmas. It was easier to say that her dad had died, but she told me her mother was living with someone else in their home. I admired her candour.

I wanted to bang down the phone whenever she spoke of boys. We had given code names to most of the senior boys in school. She was in love with Milky Way. I knew her even before Milky Way courted her, but he was a boy, and so had the right to say his feelings. I kept my lesbian yearnings to myself. At night, I caressed my pillow and cried her name.

I felt bad but Ki would still find time for me. We would do silly things like walk to Quirino Avenue where Milky Way lived, just to look at his house, where Ki said she would live someday. I searched my pockets for a match with which to burn the place down. Below the mercury street lamps, at rush hour, we waited for a jeepney to board home. It was night time before we got a ride.

"If I got a car someday, would you ride with me?" I asked her wistfully. Only the rich had cars back home and we were not rich. Milky Way had a car.

"Of course," she said. "Fetch me."

"Yes, I will," I answered.

Sometimes Ki would come so close to me, brushing a breast on my elbow. It was hard to say if it was a signal since my other classmates also did the same. There were

just too many breasts in the classroom, one hundred and twelve of them since we were fifty-six girls cramped in a class. Since it was our lone intimate contact, I taught my elbows to be gentle with Ki's breasts. Maybe she liked it too, I thought.

Other times, pretending to study, Ki would put my head between her thighs while she sat on the wooden school chair, and I read a book on the floor.

"Come here," she called me. "Come to Mama."

I never knew what she meant but I came to her. Her legs were warm and I lay my head on her crotch. She stroked my hair as she read her book. I wanted to bury my head deeper into her.

The wooden chairs in the classrooms harboured bedbugs and, at times, Ki would raise her skirt and show me the bite marks on her thighs. Sometimes, she pulled her skirt higher and I would blush. She never wore shorts. I blushed easily in her presence, and she once wondered why I became so red. I told her it could be a Vitamin B deficiency.

Until graduation day, I waited for Ki to stop talking about boys but she never did. If she had, I would have dared confess my feelings even if it meant the nuns would find out and I could be expelled from school. After a long wait, I figured out we were not for each other.

Besides, I was a neophyte. Even if I told Ki I loved her, I would not know what to do next.

How did lesbians make love? Honestly, at fifteen, I did not know. All the fiery sex manuals I read were about heterosexual exploits. What about same-sex erotica?

There was none back home. In a proud Catholic country, this kind of book was probably set afire by religious groups. Maybe the priests and nuns kept them for their own reference. I was a scholarly nerd back then. Every answer I needed, I sought in books.

As I got older, I learned it was mainly instinct — that when confronted with a nude female, I naturally knew what to do next.

It was only in Canada, at age thirty, that I got to read lesbian erotica. As an adolescent, I read heterosexual books and fantasized about having a cock and a hard-on. The illusion was so strong I even dreamed of having a sex transplant someday.

There were only two sexes in the Philippines. No institution ever recognized the third sex. Since I could not be myself, I must believe I was a man. I told friends that I would save lots of money to get myself the biggest cock transplant ever.

Ki and I parted ways. In my graduation dress, I looked more queer than ever. Ki was radiant and the boys adored her. Soon she was dating the commanding officer of the school's military unit.

Two years later, she visited me at home. She was still a joy to behold with her easy laughter. She asked me to help her with her term paper. She said her boyfriend showed her his penis. She took my pen and paper and drew a cock for me.

"You forgot the veins," I said wryly. Ki made varicose details on her artwork. I'd had enough of her but could never turn her away. I told her to come back the next day for her term paper.

I saw her again after three years. At that time, I moved out of the city to an east end suburb. I was living with a lady who had a five-year-old son. I had a family. I saw Ki in my basement apartment, which I kept for convenience, in the city. The place was dusty and in disarray. Ki remembered my birthday and gave me a man's cologne.

Every object she touched would send off dust into the air and soon our hands and faces were smudged with dirt. It was hardly romantic. We laughed. She flunked the government tests I had passed the year before and we laughed again at her misfortune.

"I have done many things with men," she confessed, "but I'm still a virgin."

"I have never done it with a man," I smiled. "I've done many silly things with women and I'm still a virgin."

We laughed even more. That was the last time I saw her.

Several years had passed and now that I was leaving, I remembered her again. I called up Ki at the local beer company where she worked.

"Ki, I'm going to Canada," I told her. "I wanted to say goodbye."

"But you can't go without seeing me," she demanded.

"I'm leaving tomorrow," I said. "Silly that I called only now, but I've got no time."

"I'm married now. I have a kid."

"Finally found someone?" I said with a lump in my throat. "Well, I just wanted to tell you I was leaving."

"Bye," she said. "I will write. Take care."

And so I left. When I arrived in Toronto, I wrote Ki. It was the distance that gave me the courage to reveal what had long been unsaid.

Dear Ki,

I wanted you to know I loved you back then. Not in years had I found anything like it. I loved you more than Milky Way could ever have. I was afraid to tell you, afraid for both of us.

Love, N

The holidays approached and she mailed me a card.

Dear N,

I knew. Merry Christmas!

Love, Ki, married with two kids

It was a strange reply but I sighed with relief. After fifteen years, I could not believe I finally told Ki what I thought I could keep forever. She knew, at last, and I eventually put this lesbian longing to rest.

Back Off

There once lived a dyke who was born with so pleasant a disposition nobody believed she was really a dyke. After all, in this part of the world, dykes never smiled. They were brute and angry, cursing those around them, including the moon. They viewed the world with disapproval and hated each other's guts. From sunrise to sunset, they wore their frowns like uniforms and went about their daily lives in hopeless contemplation.

The dyke's name was Maria — after the Virgin Mother — a name which would give any butch reason to treat the world with bitterness. She wore her hair short and because she didn't pluck her thick eyebrows like most women did, they met at her forehead and made her look mean. Yet despite her appearance, she was amiable and good-natured. She treated all people the same way, even those who said that dykes ought to be raped so they'd know their place in the world. Maria would only reply that people didn't mean what they said. She let such words go in one ear and out the other.

The other dykes were like always ready to have a brawl or something. Not only with unkind people who said dykes should go to hell, but also among themselves. They fought most of the time over women. Since they

had made a lifestyle out of feuding they also rumbled over basketball scores, horse bets, TV shows and local politics. They also argued about who was lesbian and who was straight, and who was a real dyke and who was just a fake. They said Maria was trying hard to be a dyke when she was not. Maria spoke softly and walked demurely, which they said disgraced the dykehood.

"A dyke isn't always what you think she is," rebutted Maria. "My body will turn to ashes but my soul will be a dyke forever."

Sometimes they didn't understand why they hated each other. Instead of bonding together because society treated them as outcasts, they perpetuated the cycle and ostracized each other. At the slightest chance, they unleashed their own self-hate on their fellow dykes. Each one imagined she belonged to the world more than the other.

"What ya looking at my girl for? Go get your own," a dyke who wanted to have a fight told Maria one night. "How'd you ever find a girl when you're a sissy?" Most dykes would have lost control and shot her between the eyes. Not Maria, who only said, "You're fortunate to have such a beautiful partner."

She smiled a lot and sometimes men thought she was flirting with them. They made passes at her, which she took as merely fraternal approval. When one suitor became persistent, she met with him in a beerhouse and drank all night.

"Brother, I know this is difficult for you to believe but I am of a different persuasion," she explained in her sweet nice voice. "It would be best for you to offer your

noble intentions to a pure woman who would be able to reciprocate your feelings. I know the pain of rejection for I have been turned down many times, too."

"You're missing a lot, Babe," one ardent suitor told her while demonstrating his muscled arms. "It's as huge as a horse's cock."

"No woman could take you to the Seventh Heaven," bragged another. "You haven't met the right man."

When they persevered, she wrote them letters — sometimes three pages long — explaining her position, for indeed she was a pleasant dyke.

Her life had not been easy. One midnight in June, during a brownout, she was born to destitute parents. The midwife, who delivered her in the dark, mistook her umbilical cord for a sex organ and announced she was a boy. Her father cheered the announcement for, in this part of the world, the birth of a boy was always met with jubilation. When the lights came back, they realized their mistake. Her disappointed father hurriedly left the house to drown himself in a bottle of gin.

Maria survived with little nourishment and was fed with diluted milk. When that was not available, she drank a beverage made out of toasted rice.

Scabies grew on her young flesh and the flies followed her like royal subjects. She ate spoiled fruits and learned to avoid the worms that gathered near the pits. She slept on the wooden floor with her parents and siblings. She fetched water and took baths from a public pump two blocks away. No work, not even boy's work,

daunted her, such as delivering newspapers, selling cigarettes on the streets and taking illegal horse bets.

She walked two kilometres to her school, where she learned good manners and applied them to being a dyke. From the nuns who taught catechism in their district, she learned to love her neighbours as Christ loved the church. She believed God had a divine lesbian plan for her, so she never worried. After all, she often said, "I was born with the wrong sex. What else could go wrong?" Men enjoyed many rights and privileges in this part of the world and Maria felt short-changed.

She met a lady dentist and the world seemed brighter, as though everyone wore a fresh breath. They were effortlessly drawn to each other and made love in her clinic on the very day they met. They fucked on the dental chair right after the last patient left and stopped before the first patient arrived the next day. They casually bade each other farewell and promised to keep in touch.

Maria ached to see the dentist and visited her that afternoon. She remembered Maria's molars and bicuspid, but denied everything else. They never kissed, they never fucked and she was a proper person who wouldn't be caught doing such things with a dyke.

Maria's inner voice shouted, "Back off!"

"Did you bump your head or something?" Maria asked. "Why block me out? I don't know what fear lurks in your mind causing you to wipe me out of it. I could understand if weeks, months or years had passed. It was only yesterday! As a matter of fact, it was only this

morning! This is more painful than having all my teeth pulled. This is more disgusting than a Pap smear. Since you are afraid to accept your true self, I will back out of your life. I hope you find peace in your sex life."

Maria gave her the peace sign using the same two fingers she had fucked her with. Though she left feeling like she'd had a root canal, she shrugged and considered it another one of life's many mysteries.

At the dyke bar that night, the butches who learned about her dentist sang "Unforgettable" to irk her. The pleasant dyke wasn't bothered at all and sang as loudly as the gang, for she loved the lyrics. Although she was hurt, she knew there would be other girls and that the next one would be better.

The pleasant dyke met another girl with a better memory, who remembered everything, even the lousy parts. It didn't matter that her new girlfriend had vaginismus, the involuntary and painful contraction of her vaginal muscles, which left Maria's fingers sore for days. They were a handsome pair. Maria met the girl's family and when she inquired where the girl's mother went every Wednesday night, she found out she went to church praying that the lesbian spirits be exorcised from her daughter.

"She said you have been a bad influence on me and have caused damnation in our lives," Maria's girl said. "We used to be a happy family until you came." She added that her father, who was a migrant worker in Saudi Arabia, would have a heart attack if he found out about her dyke. "Already he is losing his hair working

hard in the desert heat so he can give us a good life. And what am I doing in return?" she sobbed.

Maria's inner voice shouted, "Back off!"

She comforted her girl and said, "If I am coming between you and your family, I will back out. I know how your parents feel. I myself would not want my own sister to fall for a dyke. We may be the happiest people on earth, but it is not worth it if those around us suffer."

She left the restaurant, crossed the street and never looked back at her pretty girl. Later at the bar, one drunk dyke narrated that a girl once brought her to meet a favourite aunt. The butch put on her best clothes and went for a haircut. She even borrowed her brother's car. It turned out her girlfriend's aunt was comatose in the hospital. "There were all those tubes running out from every hole in her body. She was attached to all those blipping monitors. She had lost all consciousness. It was like being introduced to a concrete wall," the dyke told Maria. The story made Maria laugh.

"What's so funny?" the inebriated dyke asked. She stood up, broke a bottle of beer and challenged Maria to a fist fight. The other dykes, who came with their girls to the bar, calmed her down.

"Show some respect to our girls," they shouted. The night passed by peacefully. The pleasant dyke went on with her life and could only hope that the next girl would be better. Maybe someone with no family — like an orphan?

For a while, she led a celibate life. Her fingers stiffened and began to hurt. She hated doctors and pain killers and

went instead to a house where a charismatic healing ministry was held every Tuesday. She filled out a form about her affliction and gave a reasonable donation. An interviewer met her and led her to the end of the hall where they sat face-to-face.

She asked Maria about her morality, which she said was the first step to diagnosis. Sickness, she said, could always be traced to a patient's spiritual problem.

"I was observing you," the interviewer informed her, "I could see you're a dyke. In the church we have people like you who became nuns, for they chose the spirit over the flesh. Sister, are you ready to give up your sinful life? Are you ready to accept Christ into your life? Then let us pray together so that you may be healed of your pain."

Maria's inner voice shouted, "Back off!"

Before the interviewer could bless her, Maria stopped her. "I believe in God but I could not live a lie. Sister, I can't promise I would not fall for a woman again. I can't belong to this church so I will back out. But since I have already paid, can I proceed to the repentance room where I could at least have a word with the Lord?"

When she entered the room, she dropped to her knees, unrepentant. She asked the Lord what most dykes would ask for — a woman.

"Oh, Lord," she prayed. "A dyke isn't a dyke without a woman. Amen."

Then together with a crowd of worshippers, she was led to the prayer room where a priest asked them to close their eyes.

"Lift up your arms and reach out to Jesus," he

beckoned them. "If you feel like falling down, do so, for it is the mighty power of Jesus coming unto you." Each "patient" collapsed one by one. She prepared to faint but when she opened her eyes, she was still standing solidly on the ground. Her legs felt firm and powerful. She walked to the bar that night feeling like a sinner. She told herself she'd stay away from women and never sin again. Just as she thought of this, a waitress passed by and winked at her. She ignored her and for one night she felt like a saint. The waitress was not her type anyway (and her lover was a rich butch with a private army). The pleasant dyke went home and, before retiring to bed, asked God to manifest his divine lesbian plan for her. She slept peacefully that night.

She devoted her life to photography. Maria had a good eye for pictures. She carried three cameras on her shoulders — one for black-and-white pictures, another for slides and the last one for beautiful women she saw on the streets. She loved her work and gave her all to it. She was promoted to the most coveted presidential beat and the editor called Maria to her office one day.

"This must be an important assignment for you," the editor remarked. "May I suggest you change your wardrobe and we will foot the bill for you? We cannot send you out to meet top officials, looking like a police reporter. You know how the First Lady is. Go call on this couturier and he will fit you with some nice dresses. Go to this beauty consultant so he can work on your hair and face."

Maria's inner voice shouted, "Back off!"

"Madam Editor," she addressed her. "I'm sure there are other lensmen in this paper who would be thrilled to have this assignment. I want to keep my cotton shirts, rubber shoes and jeans. Since I know the First Lady hates this, I will back out of this promotion. I would even consider being reassigned to the wire room or the night desk where there are no dress codes."

Back at the bar, the dykes didn't know she had dumped her promotion. "Hey Kido, aren't you going to pluck your thick eyebrows and armpit hair for the First Lady?" They vowed to throw her out of the bar if she ever went there in her palatial attire. "It's better to be nude than wear a dress," one dyke pointed out. A painter among the butches asked, "How do you paint a nude dyke? Without anything on, she will just be another woman. What sets us apart are our clothes. You can never paint a nude dyke." The painter passed around a picture of two naked women and they couldn't tell which one of them was the butch.

While working on the night shift, Maria met a bar girl with a checkered past. She learned the woman had a son. The attraction was instant and they made love the following day, after their shifts were over. The boy hated her at first, but since Maria had a way with kids, he became comfortable with her. The three of them slept together with the mother in between Maria and the boy. At night, the child slept pinching his mother's left nipple, while Maria squeezed the other tit.

One day, she was awakened to the call of the three-year-old boy. "Daddy, Daddy, Daddy."

Maria rose from bed and carried the boy to her lap. "I'm not your daddy," Maria explained. "Who ever told you I was your daddy? Do you see that plane up there? Your daddy took off in one and never came back."

"My friends say you're my daddy and that you have no birdie," the boy answered. "I love you, Daddy." And he kissed her on the lips and pinched her nipples like he always did to his mommy. He joined his playmates outside where they called him a sissy with two mommies. One kid branded him a boy without a birdie just like his "daddy."

Maria wanted to barge out and scold the other children but she didn't want them to have an early traumatic experience with a butch. She was, after all, a pleasant dyke. Besides, kids only said things they heard from their own parents.

Her inner voice shouted, "Back off!"

That night she tearfully talked with the boy's mother. "I love your son as if he were my own. I will not forget his first day in school, and the first kite we made and flew. Your son has given me so much joy, but I don't want him being ridiculed at such a tender age. For his own sake, I will back out and leave. I love both of you very much."

She hurriedly packed her suitcase and left. She had already walked two blocks but she could still hear the boy crying and calling for her. Her eyes were still swollen when she appeared at the bar that night. "Daddy Dykey, it's not your job to raise other people's children," a goonlike butch said from one corner. "Here, drink your sorrows away." The dykes in the bar heard

Maria singing some nursery songs to herself and they joined her.

*Jane and Jill went up the hill,
To get a pail of water.*

*Jane fell down and broke her crown,
And Jill came tumbling after.*

Tralalalalalala (3x)

And Jill came tumbling after.

While singing Tralalalalalala, they all rolled out their tongues like they were kissing pussies. "Faster!" one butch shouted and they all sang and wagged their tongues faster. Tralalalalalala. "Even faster!" And they accelerated the pace until they all dropped gasping for breath with their tongues hanging out. Later, they sang other nursery songs and forgot about their cruel bouts with life. The pleasant dyke slept at a friend's place and dreamed about the old woman who lived in a shoe who had so many children she didn't know what to do. She told herself she was never going to fall for a mother again.

A year later, she thought the time was ripe to have an affair and forget about relationships. She met a married woman and they rendezvoused at odd hours. Their liaison was sparked with such intense passion that they were lying down more than they were standing up. The husband caught them making love, and was shaken, not so much with his wife's impropriety, as with her choice of a paramour.

"My husband said I have caused him great pain," her lover wept. "He said I could have gone to bed with a

truckload of men and he wouldn't have minded. By going with you, I have put his masculinity into question. He threatened suicide and asked me to come back to him."

Maria's inner voice shouted, "Back off!"

"I don't want your husband's blood on my hands," Maria replied. "If it will bring both of you peace of mind then I will back out. I know this must have put him in a bad light among his friends. Besides, God said never to covet another man's wife. Surely, we have sinned and there is no recourse but to separate."

It seemed all her passions had dissipated with that one affair. She felt old and lost. At the dyke bar that night, Maria's friends who learned about the woman's husband said, "Why wait for him to commit suicide? Let's do him now!"

Another said that not every woman who slept with a butch was a lesbian. Nevertheless, one dyke opined, a butch's purpose in life is to rescue women from their sad existence. "To women's happiness!" she lifted her glass of beer.

"And to our happiness!" Maria joined the cheers, found a renewed meaning to her lesbian life and forgot about her married lover.

Maria decided to be completely celibate again. She worked hard during the week and went to the bar every Saturday. One night she saw a butch walking in a funny and unusual way. "Don't tell anyone, but I had a Pap smear," she told Maria. "Feels like I got stabbed there." Maria, like most dykes in this part of the world,

continued to deny her woman self, rarely going for breast or vaginal tests of any sort.

The dyke, she learned, went to a well-proportioned mestiza doctor with big boobs. Almost all the butches who'd gone to her clinic had a crush on her. Maria finally went for the test, and the results showed cancer in her cervix. "It can't be true! It can't be true!" she shouted.

The doctor comforted her. "We've done further tests and the tumour is malignant."

Maria exclaimed, "It can't be true! I don't have a cervix!" The puzzled doctor couldn't understand her.

She visited the bar until she couldn't walk. While the dykes enjoyed talking about girls' bodies, it was taboo to talk about their own. Nobody came to her to talk about her decaying cervix. She lost weight and became bedridden. Her time was getting near and before she died, her nephew fetched a priest to administer the last rites.

"Do you have anything to confess?" the priest blew his words into her ears. She could smell his acrid breath and felt his beard brushing on her cheek. The nearness of a man as she lay sick made her even weaker.

Her inner voice shouted, "Back off."

"Bless me, Padre," she gasped. "I have sinned but not as much as society had sinned against me. Forgive them. Forgive yourself. It was a hell of a life. Open heaven's gate for I am ready. I see the angels, Padre. They're girls! Girls!" Then she expired with a big smile on her pleasant face.

Beauty Queen, Beauty Queer

Clitoris. Labia majora. Labia minora. Mons veneris.

They stick in Agnes's mind like holy incantations from a past life. They sound so foreign yet familiar, as though they've always been at her tongue's tip. In her own language they are *tinggil*, *labing malaki*, *labing maliit* and *bulbol*.

She looks at her classmate, Philip, whom Miss Golez, the biology teacher, calls upon to draw the female reproductive organ. With a short chalk, he meticulously sketches Figure-213a from the book onto the blackboard, and labels the vagina, fallopian tubes and uterus using neat horizontal lines.

Agnes wonders what it is like inside a woman. Is it bony like a fish? Does the vaginal canal grow little hairs like an ear? When she looks inside a woman with a flashlight, will her fallopian tubes wave at Agnes with familiar grace? Is her own labia majora falling by force of gravity and will power into testicles? If she blows into a vagina, will the woman get bloated like a balloon, or will the air sizzle out of her nose? If a baby could come out from such a small hole, how much could it take in

— a basketball, a watermelon, her head? Just how flimsy is the hymen? Is it worth giving up bike riding to keep it intact? Will she really know a virgin when she sees one?

"If a virgin pussy could talk, it would say Coke," whispers her classmate, Rita, puckering her mouth. "Coke. Coke. Coke. A fondled one would say Pepsi. C'mon, Agnes, say it!"

"Pepsi."

"Pepsi! A penetrated one would scream Sprite. SPRITE!" Rita laughs. Agnes smiles hesitantly because she's heard the joke before.

"Daydreaming again, Agnes?" Miss Golez, who is also the school's guidance counselor, asks. "Now you know how babies are made, Agnes. You did not just spring out of carabao dung."

Her classmates laugh. She stares at Rita and winks.

"When a man and a woman... PLAAAK," the teacher claps her hands, "a baby is not far behind. We all have roles to play in this life. We are either male or female. Before we can assume our roles, we should be proud of our bodies. We have to be able to look at ourselves naked before a mirror."

Miss Golez fixes her eyes on her again.

"Tonight, Agnes," she continues. "Remove your clothes and look at your body. You are a woman, Agnes. You are kind of mixed-up. For half an hour maybe, just stare at your body and be comfortable. You are a beautiful woman, Agnes. A woman is a woman. A man is a man."

"We don't have a big mirror, ma'am," Agnes excuses

herself. Her classmates burst into laughter again. "When I look in the mirror, I can only see my face."

"Well, you have to find a way. But be sure the windows and doors are closed," she reminds her.

The last time Agnes remembers being comfortable with her body was when she was seven, when she could still go out in the rain and bathe naked with the other children. Then her breasts grew, first like wild berries, then guavas, avocados. Now, thanks to her Spanish ancestors, they're as big as papayas.

At the end of the class, she sees Rita by the door.

"Did you hear it?" she asks Rita.

"Which?"

"Miss Golez's *pekpek* screaming 'Sprite! Sprite! SPRITE!'"

"But Agnes, she's not married!"

"Not all singles are virgins."

"Mirror, mirror on the wall! Do it tonight!"

"When I take a bath, I see an aerial view. I'd like to see something new — maybe you naked."

Rita hits her with a book. "It will look exactly like yours. No more, no less."

"Slightly different."

"Why bother to make out with a girl? When she takes her clothes off, it's like you're just looking in a mirror!"

"Women are different, Rita. They can be naked before you, and you still haven't seen their nakedness."

"You'll be like cymbals!"

"Bang!" Agnes raises her right hand to hit Rita's waiting palm. She tells Rita about the naked boys and men she has seen. Her brothers bathing near the water

pump. Her cousins wading in the flood. A man exposing himself to her mother in a dark alley. A moviegoer playing with himself in a Nora Aunor movie. A drunk man walking downtown with his zipper open. Her playmate's testicles prying out of his shorts like steamed beef balls. Her sick grandfather peeing anywhere it gets him.

"My God, Agnes! You've seen that many?"

"I'm tired of them!"

"I'll lose interest, too!"

Agnes tells Rita about her aunt's friend who slept at their place last week, after a game of mah-jong.

"She changed to her sleepwear and I saw her breasts. That night, she also used the chamber pot. I saw everything and yet I saw nothing."

"The room must be dark."

"A woman's bareness is deep, Rita."

"Even your thoughts are!"

"When you see a nude man, you've seen everything. With a woman, it's different."

"Always peeping, your eyes are getting sore!"

"I don't want them to use my room any more."

"Your mom's guests?"

"It bothers me now."

"Sleep. Look the other way."

"You're a miser, Rita."

"Why so?"

"Ma's big-breasted friends are always generous. When they win mah-jong, they give me a tip. Always!"

"Gago! Are my breasts really that small?"

"Doesn't matter, Rita."

"Agnes, I don't think you'll find a girl more beautiful than you are."

"I press my pimples now. I'm getting a few scars," she boasts.

"Don't do that! You have a perfect face."

Agnes wishes she hadn't been beautiful. Her skin is milky and smooth compared to Rita's coffee complexion. Everyone's nose falls flat next to hers. Her hair is Malay black and her narrow eyes are brownish-grey. Fiesta organizers always ask her to grace their summer parades. She always refuses, much to her mother's dismay. They say they'll pair her with the best-looking man in the district. If she hadn't been so pretty, people wouldn't mind so much that she'd turned out a butch. Her mother, in particular.

"But she's not bad-looking," a neighbour says puzzled. "How can she be a lesbian? *Imposible!*"

Her mother raised her to be a beauty queen. Even as a child, it was evident that she'd have long and shapely legs. "Cebo de macho. Cebo de macho!" her mother always screamed for the anti-scar ointment whenever her daughter injured herself. Even rashes or minor insect bites got her mom's utmost attention. She was spared some house chores because it might ruin her soft hands; her mother always dreamed they would hold the Miss Universe sceptre one day.

"Beauty and brains," she described her daughter.

"The next Margie Moran. The next Gloria Diaz!"

Everyone thought she could be married into a prominent family. Mestizo families, like the Ayalas, who

own and control most of the country's economy. Their dreams dissipated when it became clear she would rather be a toiler than an Ayala wife.

When she was five, her mom trained her to walk with a book on her head, but it didn't do much to improve her gait. When she danced the fandango in school, the candle-bearing glass kept falling from her head like war bombs.

"Walk slowly," her mother always told her. "Smile. Always smile. You will never win a beauty contest if you don't smile." She always encouraged her to hone a unique talent like singing the *kundiman*, love songs of the past. She said Miss International Gemma Cruz captivated the judges by playing a nose flute. "Take music lessons," she urged her. "And remember, you're not baritone!"

Agnes's English must be excellent too. She should decline an interpreter because beauty contest judges prefer a girl who can speak English as if it was her mother tongue. "And why did you join this contest?" her mom aped the contest's emcee.

"To promote tourism and put the Philippines on the map," she answered like a parrot.

"Very good!" her mom enthused. "Remember, a beauty queen eventually becomes a movie star. Or a rich man's wife!"

"I don't want to be any man's wife."

"Well," her mother once suggested, "you can be like Miss International Melanie Marquez, who married a sheik with several wives. Then you can ask for a divorce and a good settlement."

"Or enjoy the company of his other wives!" she screamed back but her mother pretended not to hear her.

"Agnes!"

"Huh?"

"Who goes first? There's only one seat," Rita asks her as a jeepney stops by.

"Go sit. I'll hang by the rear."

"Be careful." The jeepney stops at another corner and takes a passenger, who occupies the space next to Agnes.

"Come, sit on my lap," Rita calls her.

"Never mind," she declines. It isn't proper for a butch to sit on a lady's lap, she thinks.

The jeepney stops and takes one more commuter, then gears for full speed. The man leans and his weight shifts on Agnes. She loses her grip and falls on the asphalt road. The jeepney behind brakes and swings to a curb. Their jeepney stops and Rita rushes to her slumped classmate's side.

Agnes raises her bleeding forehead. She has also scraped her knees and elbows. Rita cries for help.

"It's nothing. You're overacting, Rita."

"Do this. Do this." Rita bends forward, then sideways. "A test for hemorrhoids."

"Hemorrhage, Rita."

"That's why I always sit next to you in biology! Are you really all right?"

"Go ahead! No problem here." Agnes dispatches the jeepney driver. "Just a scratch."

"Naku, Agnes! You'll never make it to the Miss Tambacol Beauty Contest. Look at yourself."

"We can walk home from here."

"We should have asked for a refund."

"It's my fault."

"Maybe we have alcohol and gauze at the house. I'll see what I can do." They walk near a water pump and Agnes washes her face. She tells Rita to fetch the supplies in her house, while she waits for her around the block. Onlookers gather around her as she touches her forehead. The bleeding has stopped and she sits calmly on a big rock near the canal. She reflects on the accident. How convenient it was to fall when she knew Rita would pick her up. What a silly thing to attempt! Almost instantly, she feels relieved, too. She isn't as pretty any- more. It wouldn't even have mattered if she lost a tooth. She celebrates her imperfection with a big sigh.

Rita appears with a roll of cotton and a bottle of hydrogen peroxide. "You'll live, thanks to me."

"You love me, Rita?"

"I'm like Mother Teresa. I love everybody."

"C'mon, admit it."

"Naku, Agnes! Why say those things! Did you hit your head badly?"

"Not enough to forget you!"

"But Agnes, I'm poor!" she stretches her body. "I intend to use my assets well."

"With me, Rita, you'll never be sorry."

"I look ahead and see darkness. With you, I see a dimmer future."

"But who gets a good break in this place?"

"The beauty queen?"

"A politician's mistress?"

"The dancer in Japan?"

"A mail-order bride?"

"The maid in Hong Kong?"

"A Miss Saigon?"

"It's getting dark, Agnes."

"My brother masturbates in the dark."

"Kuya always locks himself in his room. Maybe he does the same thing."

"Mine keeps his semen in neat colourful bottles."

"Kuya bunches up his booger on a wall."

"I can't stand men, Rita."

"I can take anything except being poor."

Agnes enters by the back door and tiptoes her way to the bathroom. She closes the door behind her and looks at herself in the sink mirror. Her left cheek is bruised and her forehead looks like a cracked egg. She sits on the toilet seat for half an hour. She leaves the toilet and carries back with her the full-length mirror from the stairway. She closes her eyes and reluctantly undresses before it. She takes three deep breaths as she raises her eyelids. She outlines the curves in her hips, waists and thighs. She looks at her swelling nipples and presses back her breasts. Her body has changed so much in puberty. She hates its shape and, like a sculptor, she starts to mentally chop away at the excessive curves. But she can only change her hair.

She opens the cabinet and seeing a pair of barber's scissors, she starts to cut her shaggy hair. She takes another strip of hair and off it goes to the floor. A clip to

the bangs. A trim around the ears. Snip. Snip. Snip. With every nip, she cuts closer to the scalp.

Her mother knocks on the door, and Agnes puts her shirt back on. The hem rubs her wounded knees, and she limps as she walks toward the door.

"Hi, Ma!"

Her mom's mouth gapes open much like, it seems to Agnes, a beauty contestant who has just won the top prize. She screams in disbelief at her daughter's transformation. Then she walks, crying and trembling down the hallway, until she finds her couch inside the bedroom. She stares blankly at the wall for a long time, then looks back at her smiling daughter.

"It can only be from your father's side of the family!"

Throw It To The River

Throw, throw, throw.

The river hauls it all.

Flow, flow, flow

The earth is a big hole.

It was really a creek but we'd always called it River. The map labelled it Tripa de Gallina (Hen's Intestine) owing to its wild zigzaggy bank. Several blocks west of us, there's Manila Bay, which we always called Sea.

From our second-floor window, I could see the river. Most people would not want to live near a riverbank. There's always the menace of a flood in a sinking city like Manila. The stench, one got used to after a while. The slums flourished like algae along the waterway, for land was expensive and the river was a natural sewer. And when you live among desperate people, there's crime. Not only did a concrete fence separate our house from the creek, but also coiled on top of it was a length of rusty barbed wire. Grandma said this barrier separated us from the bad folks who used long poles to steal the dresses from our clothesline.

Grandma always threw things into the river. We were a practical family and the river was convenient.

Odd-shaped bottles which the vendors wouldn't buy, we hurled into the river. Food scraps, however, like fish and meat bones were offered to dogs and cats. But when these pets died, we threw their stiff carcasses into the water. It was a folk belief that a pet's passing forestalled its master's death. As soon as it expired, the animal's rigid body was tossed into the water. Dead rats. Crushed cockroaches. Smashed snakes. The river carried them all. Heaps of dried tamarind and papaya leaves. Fallen twigs. Plates my mom broke when my father made her angry. Grandma always said, "Throw them to the river."

The black water never lured us for a stroll, for there was nothing to see but heaping trash. The garbage was the riverbank, and it was impossible to walk on it without sliding into the murky water. Nor could we swim. The best you could do here was "shit watch" as a batch of fresh and aged stools cascaded by. It was difficult to imagine that people used to wash themselves and their clothes in this same river.

The river settled many things for us and we spoke of it in a metaphoric way. "To throw a girl into the river" meant she had been bad. Before grandpa died, we asked him to carry our woes into the next life. He asked to be wrapped in a buri mat and be thrown into the flowing water like the headless corpse we once found floating on the creek. We knew what grandpa really meant was arrange for the cheapest funeral.

His spittoon and urinal, we dumped into the water. Wood scraps, tin cans and dust sweepings, too. Sanitary napkins, so the dogs wouldn't get them. Garbage that our neighbours left on our side of the fence. It was no

use complaining to them. They were not as lucky as we who live at the very edge of the creek. Their only option was to leave their waste on the streets where flies and scavengers hovered around the rarely collected garbage. The river always flowed and carried with quiet dedication what we refused.

Then came the rainy season, when the water extracted vengeance from us. As the riverbank disappeared, the river delivered garbage back to our door, sometimes a worse mess than what we'd thrown away. Our lavatories overflowed and became unusable. Our living rooms and kitchens looked like a pool of water. And the river threatened to drown us, as rains came down for days.

"Tess, wake up!" Lucita hollered one midnight when the water rose unexpectedly. I rushed downstairs. Water pushed the door open. My brother Paulo and I carried the TV up to the bedroom. We hurried down again to move the fridge midway up the stairs, so its motor wouldn't get wet. Lucita collected our shoes and books. Angry water gushed in. Grandma and Mama gathered the pots and pans while I put the sofa atop the table. Papa was restless upstairs. In times of crisis, he held on to his rifle — just like in the war — secure in the thought that there were sardines and bread on the cabinet. He turned the fuse box off and prepared the flashlight and candles.

I brought my "Lucy" to this house three years ago. We could have lived elsewhere if I had split my income as a car body painter between two households, but it wouldn't have been enough. My family needed help and

Lucita's additional earnings as a waitress kept us going. I had left home once and lived with a girl. My family didn't want me to leave again. They were kind to Lucita. Her parents, on the other hand, turned her away when they learned about us. We could have kept it secret but you know how words get about. People always feel compelled to tell what is not their business. Her parents threw her out of their house and warned her not to come back. Her folks lived by their convictions. I was glad mine were more practical. Both Lucita and I were wage earners and we could survive without them. It turned out we could live without each other too.

Lucita left me in a rush and married a visiting *balik-bayan*, a Filipino-American. Single and divorced Filipino men living abroad seemed always desperate for Filipino wives. I almost married a sailor, myself, who was so desperate he didn't even check my background. Our fathers were good friends and tried to set us up. His father told me I didn't have to change. His son had set a deadline to marry any girl before his naval leave expired. "Wouldn't you want to go to the States?" he asked, while at the same time insinuating that his son could make a woman out of me. I locked myself in a room upstairs because the whole deal was ludicrous. At that time I thought I was already growing a moustache.

I guess I haven't told you about Lucita and me being held up near the corner two months ago. Two clean-cut guys held knives to our necks, then took off with our bags, watches and jewelry. They were not from around here, I could tell. The guy who cornered me mistook me for a woman, and made off with my bag which only had

my lunch. I always kept my wallet in my back pocket, just like a man.

It was Lucita's fault. I told her never to look happy when we walked the dangerous streets. Criminals think happy promenaders have lots of money, so they strike. "Look sad and walk," I always advised her. I was sure glad we were not harmed, but Lucita took to me differently after the incident. We went to the police station and the officer looked at me, then told Lucita to get herself a real man who could protect her.

My mind recalled the incident over and over. I resisted the holdup, but one crook had threatened to slit my throat. Lucita came between us and begged for my life. It could only happen in a movie, I thought, but she snatched me from the jaws of death. What a way for Lucita to show she loved me. I froze while the drama unfolded, and the robbers only took seconds to grab Lucita's necklace, watch and bag.

The following day, her friends and coworkers all said the same thing. She needed a real man. My ego was shattered and I didn't work for two days. I knew I wasn't a man, couldn't be one. I have lived this male fantasy longer than I have known how to tie my own shoelace. When people tell you you're not a man, it crumbles you like an earthquake did to Ruby Tower. Nothing could make a butch like me cry, only a girl rejecting me and saying, "I wish you were a man." As if I was almost perfect, except for one thing. Joy always came when people backed up my illusion. Like when strangers addressed me as "sir." Or when Mama endearingly called me her *soltero*. Or when coworkers noticed my

bulging crotch (I chose Wrangler over Levi's jeans for this effect). Or when people asked if I had been circumcised, when I was actually in the clinic for a breast cyst operation. Or when neighbours inquired foolishly if Lucita was pregnant.

When I slept, I dreamed about knocking down both robbers. Awake, I could never be a hero. I only tried to memorize their faces, which later I couldn't even identify in the police file. All of a sudden, they all looked identical. Men looked the same to me. That's why I'm a butch. Lucita described one of the muggers, the huge one, as handsome. I turned my back to curse.

When Lucita left, I did a personal inventory and threw everything out that reminded me of her. Like my dildo which I hurled into the river. She never really liked it, and I didn't know why I kept it for so long. I didn't even have a name for it when I bought it; the label only said "massager." Many things lesbian manifested themselves to me in strange ways. It seemed as if a lesbian guardian angel told me what to do and not.

Of all places, I bought it in a camera store on Hidalgo. It was not easy to go to a camera store and buy a vibrator. The store is near the bus stop where I could have met someone I knew. Everyday as I waited for the bus, I saw that dildo on the counter, standing like a tall beige lipstick, calling me like a limb I had lost. Next to the Minoltas and Nikons, this gadget was beckoning me to take it home. I went inside the store.

"Do you have an ASA 100 film? How much for a Kodak?"

"Our reloaded stock is cheaper."

"Can I see that black Canon? Is it auto-focus?"

"AE-1 model. Automated with manual overrun."

"How about that long thing — yes that one — do you still have it in stock?"

"No, that's the last one."

I gave the clerk my money and ran. I got a film that I didn't need, but forgot to buy two C batteries. At home, Lucita berated me for another unnecessary expense.

"Is that something we can eat? I will never put that thing inside me. All the things you make me do!"

It's not as if we tried the dildo right away. After Lucita raised her voice that way, my passion fizzled. I could never take a woman scolding me as if she knew more than me.

It was wasted money, I realized. With Lucita gone, I couldn't even go to the second-hand store on Evangelista and sell the dildo for a quarter of its price. Slightly used, I would tell the merchant. Really? he would ask. We used it, maybe four times.

The batteries were still working, but I put them back in the dildo. Then I flung the plastic into the water. I guess I might have even yelled Lucita's name. It splashed into the water like a dead rocket, then plunged straight to the bottom. I used the batteries as sinkers to prevent it from floating like a motorboat. I wouldn't want kids to find it and yell, "Look, a *submarino*!" I could only get rid of it through the river. I didn't want any scavenger kid picking up my vibrator from the garbage dump, either. Like one day, I'd just see it as a bayonet in his toy gun or his pencil case in school. Only the river should have it, I decided.

It was not elaborate. Made in Taiwan, of the cheapest plastic. Lucita complained about its rough edges. I got a sandpaper and smoothed what could have been the foreskin. It still hurt, Lucita said. So I had to put a lubricated condom on it. It was so stiff and long, she didn't dare move at all. I could only tell her to relax. I just knew a man designed this thing. When I put the battery cover the wrong way, the vibrator made a noise like a Black & Decker tool. I was afraid we would awaken Grandma, who slept on the other side of the bedroom. It was good that she kept the radio on all night. After its novelty wore off, we never used it again.

We didn't even know where to keep it. Locked inside the drawer? Paulo, when he needed grass or cough syrup, could open anything. He'd think we were keeping cash there. A suitcase under the bed? Mama and Papa always bickered. She'd get the bag first chance she got. Inside the pillow? Grandma sometimes slept on the wrong bed. We finally found a place atop the bookshelf where the dildo fit snugly.

Oh, I thought it would solve everything. Good sex. Lasting love. I bought it to free my hands when I made love to my Lucy. As soon as I fed the dildo into her, it got "vomited" out. And I had to hold it and keep it in place so that I couldn't hold my Lucy anymore. Still she left. She wanted a visa so badly, she picked a man. I lived in shame when she went away. When you lose to a man, it feels so bad. All the macho mockery I had to contend with, like Lucita going after the real thing.

From the window, I surveyed the river. Lucita did not just leave me, but this shitty river too. Had it not been

so dirty, I would have hurled myself into it. If I killed myself, I knew Mama would dress me in a white gown — perhaps her wedding dress — in my coffin. In their eyes, I was still their virgin daughter to be married off to Jesus in the next life. I couldn't even die in peace.

The rainy season was back and the riverbank had swollen. Lucita was like the garbage that I didn't need at my door. I swore not to take her back, even if she'd come down on her knees. Not even if she'd woo me with a stateside dildo, one with straps that would free my hands. Maybe the custom officer would charge her a big tax for it. Maybe the dildo would set off the airport alarm, and the soldiers would detain Lucita for that horrible weapon. Oh, yes, she'd probably not be crawling back at all. Who am I fooling? I had to tell myself I didn't love Lucita anymore. I had to find a new girl to take home. And I had to steal her from a man. Or another ill-struck butch. I had to take vengeance for my dishonour. I had to be better than any man. I had to win a girl in less than eleven days, the time it took Apo (Ferdinand Marcos) to woo Imelda. I had to be better than the Number One man in the country. I had to be better than any butch alive. I had to be. Or the river would take me away.

Lesbianita

Her mother always says Little Ana is so hard-headed, she makes her lose half a pint of blood each day. That she plays deaf and calls her names like *bruja* and *puta*. That she is going to wake up one morning with her mother gone. And she's going to miss her and kneel crying on her grave because she has killed her mother by being a bad girl.

Little Ana does not behave well, but says to herself that her mother is not the only woman in the world. She tells herself she is going to run away and look for a woman who will love her forever. Her mother is going to wake up one morning with Little Ana gone, and she's going to be sorry she has been a bad mother.

Her mother teaches her the song "I Once Had A Dear Old Mother," and wants her Little Ana to cry when she sings it because it is about a mom who died suddenly. She trains Little Ana to shed a tear at the flick of her fingers because girls who can do that end up in the movies. When Little Ana sings the part about the angel taking her mom away, she always giggles. Her mother tells Little Ana she will probably die of cancer, and her father will likely remarry. Her stepmother will be

wicked: she'll pinch Little Ana's ears and pull out her hair even for minor misdemeanors.

Little Ana disregards her mother. Her father, she knows, is not going to marry again because he's had enough of wicked women like her mother, who pinches her ears and pulls out her hair. She will meet many wicked women in her life, but she tells herself not to worry; someday, she'll find a good woman who will kiss her ears and stroke her hair.

Her mother teaches her a folk song — "O Mother, O Father" — about a child who asks her parents to behead and throw her in the lake because she's been ungrateful and bad. The song also says it is impossible to repay for a mother's breast milk even in one's lifetime. She tells Little Ana that she should stop disobeying her orders and follow God's fifth commandment: Honor thy parents.

Little Ana is unmoved by the song. Her playmates have never heard of it. The song doesn't frighten her, for her parents are not headhunters and she knows how to swim. And her mother's milk tastes awful. She tells herself not to worry, she'll find a big-breasted woman who will caress her little head in her full bosom and bring Little Ana's hungry mouth to her tits.

Her mother says Little Ana is so stubborn she is going to leave her in the orphanage near the Ayala Bridge, where the nuns will make her mop the floors and where the food will be rationed.

Little Ana refuses to yield to her mother's pressure. Any place where there are women will be like heaven, she convinces herself. She wonders if nuns have long

hair and wear bikini panties. She is tired of her mother's cooking and tells herself not to worry; she'll find her own woman who will cook a feast for her.

Her mother says Little Ana is a brat. That she should not answer her parents back because older people know better. She says she has grown a mole on her chest near the breastbone, which according to folk belief means Little Ana will be a cross she will carry all her life. She tells Little Ana to respect her parents or her own children will treat her badly someday.

Little Ana does not obey as she is told. She is sure she will never marry nor have her own nasty children. She tells herself she will look for a woman with a mole on her head, which means she is sensible, and will choose to live with her rather than with a man.

Her mother says Little Ana should stop having tantrums. That she will not always get what she wants in this world. That she shouldn't cry and moo like a cow early in the morning, waking up all their neighbours. Or else she's going to put her inside a rice sack and dump her in the garbage.

Little Ana flares up again. So what? A woman who loves cows will pick up the sack where her mother put her. And she will bring home the sack and find out it's Little Ana, not a cow. She will kiss and hug her forever, and she will give Little Ana all she wants and she will never moo like a cow again.

Her mother says Little Ana should stop peeing standing up like her brothers. Girls pee sitting down, she told her. Even girl dogs pee differently than boy dogs.

And girls, after peeing, should wash their "flower" with a ladle of water.

Little Ana does not comply, but pees lying down in bed and pretends she's sleeping. She tells herself that when she grows up, she will invent an *embudo* — a funnel to attach to her "flower" — so she can urinate standing up and shoot her pee straight into a beer bottle. No ladle necessary, for she would just shake her gadget up and down just like what her brothers do.

Her mother says Little Ana should stop playing with toy guns and cars. That she should stop drawing a moustache with her eyebrow pencil. That she should sit properly with her legs together and stop climbing trees.

Little Ana plays deaf. Dolls, she says, are boring toys because when you take off their clothes, they don't even have "flowers." She tells herself she will grow a moustache someday, join the insurgents in the countryside and fall in love with women renegades who climb trees and sit whichever way they please.

Her mother says Little Ana is always out playing in the streets. That she only goes home when she is tired and hungry. She warns her about the perverts and criminals who prey on unsuspecting street kids.

Little Ana does not pay attention. She's not going to be locked up in the house like her grandma, auntie and mama. She tells herself it is better to be out in the streets than stay home to do the laundry, sew and cook. While playing *cara y cruz* with some glue-sniffing newsboys, she gets hit by a black car and dies instantly.

Her mother kneels on Little Ana's grave and says coldly, "I told you so. Now, I'm free."

With only Little Ana holding her marriage together, she leaves her cuckold husband. She runs away with the dyke musician next door who always tells her, "I play the harmonica well, but I do a pussy better."

Dyke With Two Wyves

Not that I blame the bureaucrats as I lie in bed this evening with two wyves. I was not prepared for this. Yes, there are times when I think only a lesbian is anatomically predisposed to bigamy — being born with two hands.

As I read a book on this king-size bed I share with two women, my head is propped up by their arms. I sleep with the windows open since six breasts, including my own, are suffocating me with their weight. Let me tell you, I never asked for this. I am a domesticated dyke. A homing homo. I'm home to my woman as soon as I'm off from work. It has always been that way, except that now I go home to two.

On my left is Lorna.

"Kumusta!"

I met her in an Asian store during our first year in Toronto. She never wanted me but I trailed her from summer to fall, knowing that in winter my doggedness would pay off. Neither of us had experienced winter before, and when it drew near, we took solace in each other's familiar warmth. Our homesick hearts pounded to the same beat. The leaves fell and the white landscape and freezing weather brought nothing but thoughts of

death and desolation. Only when I looked into her eyes was I transported to a veranda where I could see coconut trees dancing to the warm afternoon winds.

She always said "We're going to die here. We're going to die here. And that nobody will even take us to our graves."

Lorna was a strong woman and she never seemed to want me. I had to scare her somehow. I begged her to love me, feed me and take care of me. I could not translate these needs to a foreign woman. I didn't even know where the lesbians were in Toronto. So many lesbian-looking women and my radar was malfunctioning.

"I don't look lesbian."

When I found them, what a disappointment! Many of them had been with men. It shattered my mind. You didn't make those mistakes back home. You couldn't be a butch with a past. It could ruin your reputation, especially with the women.

Since I arrived, I had not had sex. To keep my libido in check, I counted the dollars in my wallet and balanced my bankbook. I came to Canada to be rich, I told myself. I kissed the queen's picture on the paper bill. When I return home someday, I'll be so rich all the women who trampled on me once, will line up to be taken to dinners in five-star hotels. To all the women who made me cry, I will have my sweet revenge. You made the wrong decisions. Ha. Ha. Ha.

Even with hard work, sometimes I still could not sleep. I'd be so stiff and I'd think of all my women. I just found myself, one day, playing with a dill cucumber and

pressing it against my cunt. Some days it would be zucchinis. I used them straight from the stores and just removed the tops until their juicy insides were exposed. Sometimes I'd use grapes. I skinned one and held the tiny grape against me. Carrots were too stiff. Crunchy apples crumbled easily. Kiwis were okay. Green bananas gave me some control; the ripe ones just sort of melted. I never used familiar fruits and veggies from home. There had to be some reverence for the food one grew up on, such as mangos and guavas. I was sure glad the varieties of bananas and carrots I found here were different. Just different. Bigger maybe.

"You never told me this."

It's not something you even tell yourself. I'm not proud of it. Canada is a land of plenty. So many fruits and vegetables from all over the world at my disposal. Like plums, which we didn't have back home. My roommates asked if I had turned vegetarian. Or what freshener I used to make my sheets smell like a fruit punch. I ran out of fruits and when I checked the fridge drawer, I only saw that pepper. Wow, was it hot! It sent me scampering naked into the washroom. I'd had it. I needed a real woman.

"If only those fruits could talk!"

I told Lorna I was afraid of the snow, of slipping on ice and getting buried frozen by total whiteness. And why is it so dark in Toronto by three p.m? Have you ever seen a tropical sunset? How quickly a sun drops to the horizon when it sets? The heavens turn from orange to purple to black. That's when I start craving for company. I just can't be alone at night. There is always something

to unburden to a woman. And during winter in sunless Toronto, I'd be yearning for one as soon as I had lunch.

She always said "Toronto was like a black-and-white TV."

I cried a lot. I summoned Lorna for words of comfort that only an immigrant could give another.

"I told her I was not a lesbian."

Then I would teach her. I wanted to fuck her hard, for my fingers had not felt a pussy's warmth in months, but I didn't want to scare her away. Sex didn't seem to be important. Really! Sometimes I scared her. She hid from me and screened her calls. She used the subway and somehow we kept bumping into each other. Also, she clipped coupons and I knew she'd be at Loblaw's after work. I knew she'd be at Honest Ed's when the corned beef sold for \$1.99. I went to Broadview to buy her crabs and mudfish and left them at her doorsteps. Then I'd call her and she'd be surprised.

"I expected flowers!"

I also brought her mangos. We would close our eyes and have flashbacks. Banana blossoms and young jackfruits. I found these things for her.

"I told her to go find herself another girl."

The timing and place were ideal. If we were back home, Lorna would not even have set eyes on me. Keeping a good reputation was very important there. Being a lesbian would never have occurred to her. She's the eldest and had to be a role model for her big family. She discovered her lesbian self on a foreign soil. I went to her for guidance because I felt like I was going cuckoo. I was talking to myself! She said it was because I went

out on the streets with my hair wet, the wind chill froze my brains. We often wondered why there were so many crazy people on Toronto's streets. People who talked to themselves.

"I told her she'd not go anywhere if she kept looking back. She always complained about work, only getting jobs that white people didn't want to do. I told her we were lucky: we were neither white nor black."

Brown as the brick buildings around the city. Nobody seemed to notice us. Here in Canada, I felt like I lived in a hospital. My health was taken care of. There was food. The environment was clean. The people cared but were detached. But who wanted to live in a hospital? And why shouldn't I think of home? My wyfe, Amelia, was still there.

I waited for her and tried to be faithful. But she could not come to Canada. Straight people could sponsor their pen-pals, but me? I couldn't get my wyfe! She flooded me with so many letters every postal day that I no longer knew where to store them in the small apartment I shared with three compatriots.

I arrived here with only half of me. I was so lost. I didn't even know how to take care of myself. For five years, Amelia had done that for me. I didn't even know how to talk to people.

Lorna and I discussed Amelia a lot. She said she was not going to be any dyke's mistress. Sometimes we talked about it the whole night. Neither of us could get jobs that used our brains, so it didn't matter if we were half-asleep at work the following day.

After office hours, we'd ride the slow streetcars to

discover inner Toronto. We took the subway train from Wilson to Finch, then hopped on any bus using our Metropasses. Then we took the subway from Finch to Wilson until we felt all dizzy and nauseated. We just wanted to get tired, fall asleep and dream of home where the warm breeze lulled us to sleep. Our dry bodies could not take the freezing any more and we longed to be defrosted.

We really wanted to watch a movie, but we had to think about the rent first. Also, Lorna sent money home, for she was a dutiful daughter. I was just a sexually starved dyke willing to bet my next earning on a hot pussy.

I suggested we could save rent if we shared an apartment together. It took a long time for her to take my offer. Then we lived together and were finally a couple. We first fucked on Christmas Day ten years ago. My best Christmas gift. And Amelia said we first did it on a Good Friday fifteen years ago. I was fucking these women on the days of Christ's birth and death! Lorna and I moved in together but, at the back of our minds, we always thought about Amelia. I stopped writing to her. It was hard, but I wanted her to look for a new mate.

Then one day five years ago, guess who came knocking at my door with a big suitcase but Amelia! Hey, wake up. It's your turn to tell our story. Amelia loves to sleep.

"I was asleep when Lorna stole you!"

She arrived with a white man whom she paid to be her husband for immigration purposes.

"I saved money for ten years to pay that Canadian. My life savings!"

I thought it was over between us. I often wondered how she was. What had happened to her? We stopped corresponding. I often thought about her and felt bad that I left her to have a good life here.

"When we lived together, I left my family to be with her and then she abandoned me."

I had one chance to go and I grabbed it. I didn't even think twice. Amelia appeared at our house on Gerrard and demanded a place to stay. I was dumbfounded. I called Lorna right away. She told me to get rid of her. I looked for a place for Amelia near Sherbourne. That night, I slept with her and Lorna was very upset. Then I slept here and there, alternately. When I was at Amelia's house, I thought about Lorna, and when I was here, I thought about Amelia. I couldn't live that way anymore. I still had very strong feelings for Amelia. Then one night I didn't sleep at either woman's place.

"Is there a third woman?"

Amelia called Lorna and accused her of stealing me. Lorna said it was all up to me. Up to me? Meaning I had to decide? Amelia was like a sister to me, and Lorna was like a mother. Must one choose between a sister and a mother? Amelia reminded me of my playful youth in my birth land, and Lorna gave me the strength to face the challenges of a new land. I slept in a bed-and-breakfast place, hoping to find peace. Then I had to pick up some clothes and went to Lorna's place. When I got in, I saw them hugging each other. Amelia was crying. Lorna was consoling her. They sent me away. I asked what they

were doing and they sent me away. I stayed outside. They decided that it was all up to me.

Back home, Amelia and I lived contentedly. We were positive thinkers and never worried about anything. Of the meagre sum we earned, we set aside one-tenth for the church of prosperity and positive thinking. We counted our blessings and picked up pennies on the streets to affirm acceptance of any form of wealth into our lives. We wore polka-dotted clothes, for they symbolize money. We painted the house green, for it means prosperity. We dreamed of a richer life and we thought about migrating to any rich country. We hopped from one embassy to the next, and sought agents for jobs in Hong Kong, Saudi Arabia and Japan. We were positively sure we would be taken in. Canada accepted me, answering half of our prayer. We judged it positively and believed Amelia would get in too.

"It wasn't my fault that I couldn't follow her."

They wanted me to make up my mind. I couldn't. Like I would always love two countries — my birth land and Canada. And I would always love two women. I didn't go home for many nights. They fetched me from work and we've been together ever since.

Having two wyves is not easy. I asked Lorna to take a shot of Amelia and me, our first picture together in ten years. Amelia and I posed lovingly on a couch in the living room. When the film came back, the photos only showed me. Lorna cropped Amelia out of every shot!

Both women are also in the habit of cooking food which the other hates. I am afraid to compliment the cook as I happily munch dinner, fearing that the kitchen

will be turned into a veritable war zone. The garbage teems of untouched food. My wyves, almost instantly, became slim, while my doctor warned me about being overweight.

To avoid appearing like I favor one over the other, I do not even turn on my side in bed. I try to sleep flat. No, we don't have a threesome. We're much too coy for that. There's more to life now than sex. Like garage sales and crappie fishing in High Park. I'm just glad we're all together. Although at times when I sleep, I lose my hands. Sometimes I don't remember who is on my left and right. When the lights are out, somebody starts to breathe heavily on my left side. It must be Lorna. And yes, where is my right hand? Maybe this is sex. Like a guitar, my left hand plays the chords and my right one strums. Then Lorna, Amelia and I sing in perfect harmony.

Keepsake

"I'm leaving you," Elsa announces unexpectedly. She reaches for her bra on the floor but her teenage lover, Consuelo, grabs it away. Her young lover buries her nose between Elsa's breasts. She pushes her aside.

"I'm the Houdini of Brassieres," Consuelo declares standing on the bed waving Elsa's bra. "Throw me into the lake with my hands tied behind my back by a hundred bras and I will escape in thirty seconds, maybe twenty-five!"

"We have to stop seeing each other," Elsa ignores her.

The warning doesn't bother the playful seventeen-year old. Consuelo's mother has threatened to leave her father since she was a child, but they are still together. Her love for Elsa is more noble. Nothing can separate them. It is probably just Elsa's period coming. Their relationship the past two years, she observes, has gone through highs and lows dictated by either her or Elsa's menstrual cycle.

"My husband is running for mayor. I have to be there for him," Elsa explains hesitantly. "My son is down with tuberculosis. I'm such a bad mother."

Consuelo turns pale. The world used to be just Elsa and her. Suddenly the plot twists and their story is

littered with sinister characters. Her eyes begin to get moist.

"I'm sorry," Elsa weeps. "I thought I was ready to leave him. I shouldn't have dragged you into this, you young soul."

Consuelo grips a pillow with the motel's faded name on it. She catches her grim reflection in the set of mirrors that decorates the dark room. Just a while back, she used them to check the stages of their lovemaking at different angles.

"You can't leave me Elsa," she says. "This can't be true."

"Grow up, Consuelo," Elsa raises her voice. "Some-day you will thank me for this."

"Don't leave me, Elsa," she begs. "It's going to kill me."

Elsa fixes her face and her slightly greying hair. She picks up the phone.

"We're checking out," she tells the clerk. Then she looks at Consuelo.

"Hurry up," Elsa prods her stoned lover. They had booked the room for only three hours and must leave soon.

"This is all too sudden," Consuelo says touching her lover's hips from behind while kissing her earlobe. "Do you mean to say that was our last sex?"

Elsa breaks loose. She digs inside her purse and finds her sunglasses.

"Get your shades," she orders her lover. Elsa has always been discreet, wearing only dark glasses when they meet in seedy places like this one. Consuelo puts her aviator glasses on. She weeps like a child.

"Why, Elsa?" she pleads. "Why?"

A room boy knocks at the door, and Elsa hands him fifty pesos and a generous tip. Elsa guides a perturbed Consuelo by her arm down the stairs into her Toyota. As soon as she starts the car, the same room boy lifts the motel's garage door and allows the car to pass. Even though eye contact with clients is bad for business, he looks curiously at the two women. Consuelo gives him the finger. He looks away.

Elsa manoeuvres the car onto the dark and twisted road known in Manila as Motel Row. Consuelo shakes in her seat, saddened by her first lover's unexpected farewell. Her Papa once said that any grief must be suffered privately. She regains her composure only to be overtaken by embarrassment over such a display of weakness. She has disgraced herself and cries again.

Suddenly, she remembers the day her Papa cried shamelessly, the first time she saw him broke down. It was the day his diabetic mother died of heart failure. Before she was laid in her coffin, Consuelo saw her Papa cut a lock of hair from her grandmother. He told her it was a keepsake, for she was gone forever. Her Papa said warriors in the past also left hairpieces to their wives and mothers, just in case they failed to return home.

She thinks about asking Elsa for a lock of hair as a remembrance, but there is nothing to miss about her brown curly hair. In fact, if there is a part of her lover that she despises the most, it is her hair. It represents the vain and superficial in Elsa. Many times when they dated, she would be late on account of that damn hair.

She changes her hairdos at random and Consuelo feels bad about not being warned, at least.

It irks her easily, for it seems like Elsa is transformed into a different person with every hair colour or hairstyle she chooses. When Elsa appeared once with cropped hair, the butch in Consuelo could not come when they made love, her lover looked so abominably like a man.

An off-season typhoon threatens the city. Many have gone home early before the rain hits Manila. Strong winds sweep the road of its week-long garbage, and sway the pliant coconut trees that line Roxas Boulevard. The wind blows and whispers in Consuelo's ears.

The car turns left on Vito Cruz, just six more blocks to Consuelo's house. Mabini, Harrison, Taft, Sandejas, Dominga, Muñoz, Consuelo recites the streets in her head.

"It will be our last night together," she tells herself. "I will never see or fuck Elsa again. I must come up with something fast."

Thoughts burst like rapid fireworks in her mind.

"Your pubic hair, Elsa," she breaks her silence.

"Leave me your pubic hair."

"What?"

"I cannot bear to see you go, Elsa, but if that is what you want, give them to me as a keepsake."

"I cannot take this conversation"

"Listen, Elsa," Consuelo grabs her arm and the car wiggles a bit. "I love you. I need something to remember you by."

"Then keep the clothes I bought for you."

"I need something more, Elsa. I can't live without you. If you must really go, please grant my wish."

The car turns right on Arellano and stops at the third house.

"You're home now, Consuelo," a hardened Elsa blurts out. "Believe me, everything will be all right."

"Remember when we first made love?" Consuelo turns deaf and nostalgic. "Your pubic hair looked dull brown and dead. I worked hard to make you a happy woman, Elsa."

"Don't call it work," an irritated Elsa interrupts.

"Look at your hair, down there," Consuelo urges her.

"They're so alive now with my love and passion. Their colour has even changed to reddish brown! I fed it with my kisses, buried it with my whole face and, yes, fertilized it with my spit and cunt juice. They're mine, Elsa. They're mine to harvest!"

"Harvest?" Elsa pushes her out of the car into the rain. "Don't call me ever!"

"They're mine, Elsa. You know it. They're mine!" The rain drowns Consuelo's voice. She thrusts her head inside the window but Elsa pushes it out. She rolls up the window.

"If you have to jump to another lover, grow another crop for her. That hair is mine!" Consuelo shouts at the car as it turns and heads back north.

Although wet, she shivers more out of humiliation than from the coldness of the tropical storm. She opens the gate and walks home. The house smells of garlic and vinegar. A dish of chicken adobo, her favourite meal, is on the table. Her father is sitting at the table with a *cerveza* beside him. Consuelo removes her wet shoes and leaves them by the doorway.

"Have you had dinner?" he asks.

"Yes, Papa," Consuelo feigns fullness. She takes her father's right hand and brings it to her forehead, a traditional greeting. She uses her left hand instead of the right, for it still smacks of Elsa's pussy.

"Bless you, my child," he murmurs. "May the Lord have mercy on you." His hand draws an invisible cross in the air.

"I have to rest now, Papa," Consuelo excuses herself. "I'm tired."

She changes to her pajamas and hangs her wet clothes. She washes herself using only her left hand. She tries to brush her teeth with her left but finds it awkward. She covers her right hand with a plastic bag so it does not get wet from the brushing.

"I need to smell Elsa tonight," she mumbles.

"Are you hurt, *hija*? What happened to your hand?" her Mama asks.

"Nothing, Mama," she answers back. "My hands are tired and the water's too cold."

She locks herself in her room, curls up in bed and holds her right hand up her nose like a fetus. Elsa's pungent odour still dwells on her fingers. Hatred builds up inside her and she starts calling herself stupid names. Then she vents her anger on Elsa.

"A swindler, that's what she is," she kicks her pillow. There are many young girls in school. Why does she have to fall for a wretched old bitch who is twice her age?

She realizes it is a religious decision. Young women her age deserve total respect and must be kept as virgins until they are married.

"How will I ever marry them?" she laments.

And then one day, Elsa appeared in Consuelo's class, married, yes, but very lonely. She must be the saddest person Consuelo had ever met in her life. She wore only purple dresses, the colour they draped over the saints in churches during Holy Week. She cried easily too. She brought Consuelo to many first-run tearjerker movies where they cried, necked and petted. Cried, necked and petted. Before that, Consuelo only went to double-run movies, where they showed two old films for a discounted price. One must comfort the sad, she remembers from her religion class. Elsa needs somebody, and she has set her eyes on Consuelo who listened to her endless stories of marital woes.

She would leave her husband soon, she promised, but needed an anchor like Consuelo. She said they slept in separate bedrooms. She only married him because he promised to send all her siblings to school, which he did. She told her he kept a mistress. Consuelo liked being called Elsa's anchor. She often felt that her life as a lesbian was garbage, something to be thrown away, but certainly nothing as useful as an anchor. She fell for Elsa's tricks and they were inseparable for two years.

"Why did she have to tell me lies," Consuelo cries again. "Why must it be me?" Humiliating thoughts creep in her mind over and over. She eventually gets tired and drops into a shallow sleep. The first crow of the neighbour's rooster awakens her in the morning. The city coils back to life. She hears the swift sounds of racing jeeps and the loud music on their stereos. She weeps again.

She rises and prepares for school. She leaves an hour earlier. She always walks one kilometre from the jeepney stop to her school, but now takes a tricycle instead. The road is muddy from last night's rain. She doesn't want to miss Elsa. She must have been waiting for an hour when Elsa's car appears near the school gate. She waits until Elsa has parked her car. Consuelo walks toward her.

"Good morning, Elsa."

"Leave me alone."

"I miss you, Elsa."

"Will you stop pestering me?"

"I'm trying but I can't"

"Then try harder."

"Have you thought about the pubic hair?"

"Yes. And the answer is no."

"Help me, please."

"We're through, Consuelo. That's the truth and you must accept it. Don't be so stupid," Elsa pushes her away, eyes glowing with hatred. Strange words to come out of the same woman who used to beg for her gentle caresses and warm kisses. It's eight o'clock and time for their respective classes. They head in separate directions.

"Think about it, Elsa."

The day seems endless. When her last class finally ends at three, Consuelo heads home, but not before checking Elsa's car in the parking lot. It is not there any more. She always waits for her on their spot near the man-made lagoon. She leaves hurriedly.

"Are you sick, my child?" her mother asks her at home.

"I'm not feeling well, Mama," she feigns sickness. "Besides, I have exams tomorrow. I have to study."

"Go and rest now, and I will prepare some hot-and-sour beef stew for you."

"Thanks, Mama."

After dinner in bed, she lies awake thinking of nobody but Elsa. She'll probably look for her tomorrow, she reassures herself. She usually gets very horny by the second day. Elsa needs to be fucked tomorrow.

In the morning, her Mama knocks at her door.

"You will be late for school, *hija*," she shouts. "Hurry up."

"Oh my God, I will miss Elsa!"

She looks at her watch and decides to change her daily route. She takes a jeepney to the train station and waits for the commuter train instead. She makes the right decision, for a train has now appeared from the southern horizon. A man drops a long bamboo pole on the street to prevent jeepneys and cars from crossing the tracks.

"In just ten minutes, I will be there. I can still see Elsa."

On each side of the tracks are the slums. The smell of human feces fill the morning air. Kid squatters playing on the railway swiftly leave the ground to let the train pass by, only to return again when the last cab has passed.

It is hard to imagine that Elsa was as poor as these railway kids. There is not a trace on her face nor her manners that reveals this. Only her hands, roughened by years of hard labour as a child, still remind her of what

she used to be. By marrying a diplomat's son, she secured her and her family's future.

At school, Consuelo almost misses her prey but catches her near the stairway.

"Mrs. Perez," she calls her. She must use that name when other people are around. Elsa is with some co-teachers and ignores her. "Mrs. Perez," she shouts louder. She hates calling her by that surname, her husband's. When they were together, Elsa called herself Mrs. Consuelo Salvador. Consuelo was elated.

"What do you want now?"

"I need to talk to you, Elsa."

"I'm getting tired of this nonsense."

"Grant my wish and I promise I will never bother you again."

"*Santisima*, Consuelo, you're acting strange. People are starting to talk."

"I don't care about them."

"You care only about yourself."

"That's not true. I care about you."

"Okay, I'll think about it but just — please — leave me alone."

Consuelo skips her classes and goes to a movie instead. A gay man sits beside her and realizes he's picked the wrong guy. He goes away.

Her mind is not on the movie. She remembers their first date, in this same movie house, when she was fifteen. Elsa excused herself and went to the washroom, where she removed her underwear. She returned to her seat, unzipped her skirt and slid Consuelo's inexperienced hand through her waistband. She parted her legs

and guided Consuelo's fingers inside her. She was wet and juicy as a ripe mango fruit. She came fast.

Before that, Consuelo never knew that loving a woman entailed more than kissing and exchanging passionate glances. Elsa, having an orgasm, looked to her young eyes like someone having epileptic seizures. Eyes rolling upwards, the sudden jerks and the rigidity of her body. Consuelo wondered why she looked so fulfilled after those seizures. After a long and relaxed weekend with Elsa in Nueva Ecija, she soon experienced what they were like and understood Elsa's needs even more.

She stays at the movie house until dinnertime. When she gets home, a lesbian feature film is showing on TV. She delightedly watches the movie. But the plot twists and the actress turns straight in the end, marrying the leading man. Trashy movie, she tells herself. The night seems shorter. The next day in school, Elsa hands her an envelope and walks away without a word.

Consuelo holds the envelope with shaky fingers. It is almost weightless. It is sealed but she knows it is the hair that she asked for.

"It's really over," Consuelo consoles herself. "Good-bye, Elsa."

She wonders how Elsa cut it. With scissors or razor? She should have allowed her the pleasure as some kind of last rite. She feels a rush of anger. If she had to do it her way, she would tie Elsa up and pluck each hair with a tweezer. She feels guilty and asks the Good Lord for forgiveness and strength.

"I love her, God," she declares, holding the envelope to her heart. "I really love her."

School ends in just two weeks and the prospect of a long loveless summer daunts her. Only Elsa's memento gives her the courage to face the uncertain days ahead.

It seems like the longest day of her life. Without Elsa, school is not fun any more. Sometimes, she and Elsa fucked inside the dean's office when everyone had gone home. Consuelo always carried a folded manila paper, which they used as a mat, and she always recorded the dates they fucked on that same paper. She always asked Elsa to count her orgasms. She wrote those numbers in parentheses after the dates.

She still carries that brown paper folded in her binder. It is almost crumpled now with dried blotches of their cunt juice drawn all over it. They have used it six times and, on the average, Elsa had five multi-orgasms each time.

Consuelo loves statistics. She comes from a bright and unconventional family of inventors. Nobody in her family has ever come up rich with an invention, but they live comfortably from rents they get from old real estate properties.

Consuelo is a scholar and heads the college's honours society, a prestigious group of academic achievers. Elsa is one of the society's advisers.

She arrives home and runs straight to her room where she locks herself. A light breeze passes through the window louvre and Consuelo adjusts the lever. She gets the manila paper from her binder and lays it on her bed. She takes the scissors, and cuts the edge of the envelope. She shakes it until its last contents drop out. They are Elsa's pubic hair all right. Red and shimmering

like they're saying "Hi." A smile appears on her face for the first time in days. It feels almost like Elsa is in the room once again.

They fucked once in this room when Consuelo's parents were away. The thin panels that divide the rooms in Consuelo's house were not soundproof. When they fucked, Consuelo covered Elsa's mouth, almost suffocating her, because she shouted profanities during foreplay and screamed during orgasms. Consuelo's brothers were always around the house.

She arranges the hair in a triangular shape, much like Elsa's crotch. She turns over and brings her face near it and smells Elsa. Her breath blows some of the pubes away and they became animated like magnetized iron filings. It smells faint for she must have taken a bath before shaving. Consuelo thinks about the times she and Elsa bathed together in motels. Many things Elsa did to her, she could do herself by masturbation. But the way Elsa kissed and licked her back could not be done alone. Consuelo can almost feel Elsa beside her and her tongue instinctively darts out from her mouth. She is about to lick the hair when she realizes it is not real.

"Stop!" she orders her tongue. "Behave."

She feels the compulsion to bury her face in Elsa's hair. "Oh, Elsa," she moans. "Why, Elsa, why?"

A tear flows out of her eye. Afraid that it may taint her treasure, she immediately withdraws her face from her keepsake.

"I would have grown a sixth finger if you wanted it. There is nothing that I would not do for you. I would have loved you till your pubes turned white."

She gathers the hair in the palm of her hand and looks at it. Feeling hopeless and depressed, she remembers that a loose hair would sometimes get trapped in her throat when she went down on Elsa. She would cough and interrupt their lovemaking.

"Maybe I should just take them all in my mouth and die from an overdose."

DNA tests during her autopsy would point to Elsa as the culprit. She doesn't want any trouble for Elsa. She could have gone to the school board and reported Elsa for corrupting a minor like her, but what for? It would only send closet homosexuals like Elsa further back into hiding. Also, Elsa introduced her to a world she never knew. She brought her to burger houses and pizza joints, long before burgers and pizza became household words in Manila. Her parents only took her to noodle restaurants in downtown Chinatown.

Besides, Elsa is also performing well on the male-dominated school board. She has a good chance of being the director next year.

"Perhaps, it is also the reason why she left me," she laments.

She can't sleep that night, she can't believe it is finally over. That Elsa has granted her wish means that she wants to be left alone.

"I've given her my word that I will not bother her again."

Sleep eludes her and she starts counting Elsa's hair. It isn't until 384 that she falls into a deep slumber.

When she wakes up, she frantically collects the hair strewn all over her bed.

"Elsa, Elsa, don't be gone," she states hysterically. She gets a small white handkerchief and slips the hair inside its folds. She takes a quick bath and the day starts easily. She sacredly pins the handkerchief to her undershirt and leaves for school. She is prompt for her Effective English class.

At tea time, she thinks about making a tea bag of Elsa's pubic hair. There is gauze inside the medicine cabinet and she can make a bag by sewing the edges. Every morning, she will put her tea in a cup of hot boiling water and savour Elsa's cunt to its last flavour.

She rushes home and goes straight to her bedroom. She gets her notebook and prepares her assignments.

"I'm going to be somebody, Elsa," Consuelo says mockingly. "Just you see." The handkerchief is still pinned on her chest. The thought that Elsa is always with her sustains her existence.

Everyday after school, Consuelo heads home and empties her hair on the paper. Like Lego bricks, Consuelo builds images with it, and holds imaginary dialogues with her beloved Elsa.

With the hair she constructs an Angry Pussy. A Hungry Pussy. A Lonely Pussy. A Punk Pussy. And a Kind Pussy. Consuelo thinks that a pussy, at its natural best, is always a fierce one. It doesn't even look like a pussy, but a roaring lion.

"Grrrrrrr," she roars.

She peers through a ten-power magnifying glass and checks the hair. It looks weird all right with barely visible scales in each strand.

"If only I had a microscope, I swear I'd find something alive in here."

Consuelo tosses on her bed and ruminates about it. What makes sex so much fun? Think about all the interchange of germs with all the licking and kissing. All the bad air inhaled down there. All the tiny worms hidden beneath dirty fingernails. All the germ-carrying pubes and dried urine inching their way into one's digestive system.

"All the *gardnirella vaginalis* I have sucked from you, Elsa," Consuelo shivers. "And all for nothing."

One day at the breakfast table, her Papa asks Consuelo if that is hair on her forehead. She picks up the hair and examines it.

"Yes, Papa," she answers demurely. "It's from my teddy bear."

"You should stop playing with teddy bears now. The world is not an easy place to live in. You must prepare yourself for the real world."

"Yes, Papa. I know what you mean."

As the days pass, Consuelo finds that her dialogues with Elsa are getting boring. It used to be easy talking with the hair. As if they would answer back wittingly with little prodding from her. Her treasure is also losing its lustre and life. It looks as dead as a man's toupee. They are more dead than the day she met Elsa. She blows on them and they drift away from her like dried fish-worms. She used to hear music when they danced around her. Now she can only see litter. The mess looks like a worn steel wool scrubbing forever at her wounded heart.

She has grown tired of picking up each wayward hair and of checking her forehead for clinging ones. She gives up her plan of starting a scrapbook of girls' private hair. Just Elsa's alone seems to give her asthma.

She opens a box and starts reading Elsa's love letters. After all they have been through, her words no longer mean the same. They are just documented lies and passionate outbursts. She finds a match and puts the hair in an envelope. She goes to the backyard and starts a fire with one of Elsa's letters. When the flames rise, she drops the envelope of hair into it. The fire engulfs it fast. The hair turns even curlier before it disappears. She drops the other letters in the fire. All of them. She exhales all of her bad feelings for Elsa, then inhales what remains of her lover, for the last time.

Tooth And Nail

Everyday Irma demands more. Everyday Portia plans to leave Irma. She's had enough this time.

Irma makes her clean the house. Do the laundry. Iron her clothes. Go to the market.

She wakes her up when she falls asleep before midnight.

"I didn't ask to be on the night shift, so wait for me!"

And when Portia isn't feeling sexy, Irma forces her to bed. Slaps her when she refuses. Whacks her when she talks back. Asks her to sponge Irma's back. Shampoo her hair. Cut her hair. Cut her nails. "Where's the nail clipper? The socks? The slippers?"

Water the garden. Sweep the patio. Shovel the snow. Wash the dishes. Boil the water for her herbal tea. Massage her back and shoulders. Push Preparation-H into her ass.

Now she wants to see her without her denture. She's pushed her too far and she's leaving.

"C'mon, take it off," Irma insists. She tries to pry Portia's mouth open. "I've seen you naked. What's wrong with seeing you without your teeth?"

They struggle on the floor. Portia bites the dyke's hand and gets slapped. She pulls Irma's hair and tears

her Fruit of the Loom. She kicks Irma but misses. She hits the filing cabinet and the phone drops to the floor. The vase breaks and the lamp is pulled out of the socket. The aquarium shakes and the fish get upset.

"Remove it!" Irma orders her.

"Leave it alone!" Portia yells while covering her mouth from Irma's forceful hands.

"Do what I tell you!"

"I've had enough!"

"I'm not going to let you sleep here until you remove that denture," the dyke warns her. "Can't we have fun? Can't we have fun?"

Portia leaves the room and reappears with her coat on, carrying a small bag that has been packed and ready for several months. Just in case. She goes to the telephone and asks for a room in a lodge. Fifty-nine dollars a night, she is told. She cries and heads for the door. It's almost midnight and the last metrobus is leaving the terminal. She checks her keys.

"So, you've been keeping money from me?"

"It's my money."

"You know anything about money?"

"I want half of our savings!"

"You want your decent half? You weren't even earning decently when I picked you off the streets."

"I wish I had gone away with that sailor."

Irma starts throwing the pillows on the couch at her.

Portia still enrages her when she mentions the sailor. She met him at Hong Kong's Wanchai district, where she occasionally moonlighted in a girlie bar during weekends. The rest of the week, she's a D.H., just like Irma.

Domestic Helper. Maids in Hong Kong. Being university graduates, D.H. suits them better after having been used to the B.S.E. and C.P.A. attached to their names. But what good are titles if you can't get a good-paying job in your own country?

Sometimes the letters from home sounded so urgent. Father was sick. Sister had a new baby. Mother needed a new stove. Brother's kids needed books and new uniforms. Being a D.H. wasn't enough. During her days off, she occasionally augmented her maid's income by working in Hong Kong's famous red light district.

She never really went out of the bar with the men, even if it would mean more money. She couldn't be alone with them. She still had a choice, but had to make up her mind fast. The club manager said there were more adventurous girls who would want her job. She felt safe in the company of other needy Filipino girls in the bar. There were dancers and musicians too. Wearing a cheongsam, she waited on tables or sat with sailors with their bottles of San Mig and a ladies drink for her. She listened to their bawdy tales and grand promises of marriage and money. It was not a respectable job, hardly the kind she would write about to her family in Cebu.

Her mind often wandered to Irma whom she met one Sunday at the Statue Square in Central, where Filipino and Asian maids converged during their free days. She and Irma sat on the park bench, or settled near the fountain where they shared letters and movie magazines from back home. Sometimes they'd have a picnic at the park. Then they'd leave the other maids and take the Star Ferry from Kowloon to Hong Kong Island. Or go to mass

at St. Joseph's Cathedral. Or bargain shop in the side streets of lower Central where they bought their matching fake Rolexes as engagement watches. Irma seemed gentle and offered to lend her money for her family's use. She asked her to stop working at "The Wanch" before it was too late. The dyke even went to the club with a male friend to check on her. And there was that sailor who, even now, fills Irma with intense jealousy.

In a few months, Irma was set to leave for Canada to work as a nanny. She was sponsored there by Rose, her ex-lover, who had married to stay legal there. Irma was going to be a nanny for Rose's 14-month-old boy.

Irma promised to look for a nanny job for her, too, if she'd leave her weekend night job. She wanted her to follow her so they could be together. Even if just on weekends like in Hong Kong.

"It's like a prison," Irma wrote her from Toronto. "I have to stay with Rose for two years before I can get my papers. Sometimes, she comes knocking at my door, but I don't want her any more. Everyday I see her with her husband. He is a boring man and smells like a dog.

"Sometimes I don't feel like eating any more. I have a bad ulcer now but don't worry. My health insurance takes care of that. On weekends, I play mah-jong and blackjack at the downtown apartment of Lito (a.k.a. Lita). Remember Mila? We met her at Central. She's the married nurse and mother of two teenage boys. She now lives with a Hispanic lesbian. Our league is growing! During weekends, don't think so much about me. It's bad luck and I'm losing my bets. I can only look forward

to the day when I shall see you here. Someday, we will put up a Filipino store here. I love you."

She stopped working in the bar long before Irma found a couple to sponsor her.

"You wouldn't be here if not for me. *Ingrato!*"

"I've served and paid you more than enough!"

"I'm going to write your parents and tell them how you spent your weekends in Hong Kong."

"Leave them in peace."

"I'm going to write them about us!"

"Go ahead! I don't care any more! Write about your cruelty. Your frugality. Tell them why I don't send them money any more!"

"I'm just about ready to kill you."

"I'm going to cut off your tongue and chop off your fingers!"

"Why don't you just take off that denture?"

"So you can laugh at my sunken gums?" She turns the knob and opens the door. She walks to the gate crying.

Irma grabs her bag and kneels. Pressing her head on her partner's tummy and grasping her buttocks, Irma implores, "Please, don't go. I don't want you to go."

"You think you can always have your way!"

"I'm sorry."

"You always belittle me."

"There's nobody else but you. I love you."

Portia heaves a sigh and closes her eyes. Irma shivers in the cold and she takes her back to the house.

"You know I will do anything for you," Portia says, "but never, never ask me to take off my denture. I'm a woman and I'm vain."

Irma searches for some coins in her pocket and hands her some money.

"Go, get me some cigarettes."

Portia takes the change and wipes away her tears. She puts back her gloves and walks out of the gate. She heads towards the convenience store two blocks away. Victorious, she plays her denture with her tongue.

"Nobody is going to make me do what I don't want to do," she chuckles in the dark.

GI Jane

Dear Puti,

I'm thirty-nine years old, a light build Filipina with brown complexion. My friends call me Neneng. My real name is Luzviminda. I was named after Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao, the three biggest islands in the Philippines. My eyes are black and my hair is dark brown. I am a holder of a bachelor's degree in commerce (accounting) from the Polytechnic University of the Philippines. I enjoy quiet evenings, reading newspapers and listening to classical music.

I grew up seeing women on the streets, waiting for their GI Joes. The white men were everywhere, from the bars of Olongapo to the brothel houses in Ermita. A local girl didn't even have to look for them. They easily found her. These soldiers never had any qualms about coming to our shores for sex. Although U.S. history intertwined with the Philippines', their soldiers obviously never came to see the sights.

All my life, I searched for my GI Jane and never found her. When I got my first walking doll, a blonde and blue-eyed toy, I knew in my heart that I would bond for life with a Caucasian woman. Hollywood movies introduced me to Brooke Shields and Bo Derek, and

our trusty Hitachi brought Kate Jackson to our living room.

Sometimes, I walked the streets to see if my Jane had arrived for me. The American boys whistled at me and grabbed my arm, for I had a shapely body (34-29-36). I smiled at the soldiers as a gesture of Philippine hospitality. If I turned one down, another woman would happily keep him for the night. I hoped to see my Jane in the surplus stores near Clark Air Base, where most GI's sold their PX goods when they ran out of good-time money. Maybe she would be in the shops selling her Walkman and camera to make ends meet in a strange land. She must be desperately lonely and needing me. I roamed the busy market and saw mostly men, white and black, accompanied by Filipino girls, no taller than the foreigners' armpits. My Jane hadn't come.

My hair started to grey. My face wrinkled. The formidable Marcos died. The bases were gone, yet my dream lingered on.

I am looking for a mature and faithful white woman between the ages of thirty and forty-five. Do you fit this description? I have been waiting for you all my life. Where are you? Why haven't you sent for me? Must I languish here forever without seeing you? Are you tall or short? I am 5'4". I once thought white people were always taller and bigger than us. But Sister Mathilde, the German nun who taught us physics at St. Bridget's, was a petite woman with enormous breasts. I just wanted to kiss and hug her, but she was a living saint devoid of any craving. The Peace Corps volunteer who brought rice fertilizers seemed genuinely concerned about the

soil chemistry. She did not only inspect the rows of crops for pests and diseases, but also marched with the farmers from Laguna to Luneta as they demanded for agrarian reforms and social justice. Her thoughts possessed me long after the harvest.

My encounters with white women have only been brief. I have met more white men than women, for once the ships were docked at the bay, the soldiers and seamen roamed the town like monkey-eating eagles. As soon as I got my menses, I learned to hide from them. Although their green bucks could be tempting, I never wanted men. The white men were either sexually starved transients or priests at our churches. They're scattered in all corners, but where is my Puti? That is what I will call you from now on. It simply means white.

I am ladylike. I have never been kissed nor touched. I come from a big family of twelve children. I am the second child and I helped my parents send my sisters and brothers to school. My family thinks I have put their needs before my own, postponing marriage this long. I actually could have run off with the first white dyke who wanted me. I could have been the star dancer at the bar for lesbian officers. I could have been a prostitute among your kind, but I never had the chance, for I knew of no place where people like you meet. I have been waiting for you for nearly three decades now. Where are you, Puti? Get me out of here.

My friend, Rose, left for Melbourne to marry her male pen-pal. A neighbour corresponded with a German glassblower and married him. My aunt, a bar girl in 'Gapo, left with her American sailor. Their men took

them away, Puti. Another friend, Gina, advertised me in an Australian catalogue. How kind of her to use her own address and to screen the men — twenty-three in all — who wished to marry me. Will you allow a white man to marry me, Puti? Didn't you just want me for yourself?

Come here, Puti, and take me. Let me walk you barefooted around the beach to brown your "anemic" skin. Rest and forget about your work for a while. Come, run and catch damselflies in the rice paddies with me. And if an attractive butterfly comes fluttering by, never, I warn you, say how beautiful it is, for we believe it's from the innerworld possessing magical powers to snatch you from this earth. What if they're male? Would you want to be imprisoned in such a world? And when we see a hump in a deserted field, never hastily grab me to kiss and roll over the grass, for dwarves live in those humps and we must seek permission. "Can we pass, Old Man?"

Spend a lazy afternoon at the plaza with me. We will munch freshly fried peanuts and grilled chicken feet before the statue of our hero Dr. Jose Rizal, a nationalist who married a white woman. We will listen to the beggars sing and pick lucky numbers from sweepstake vendors-cum-beggars who need good luck more than we do.

I will take you for a slow ride in a pedicab or calesa. We will walk along the shore to watch the sun set and exchange vows. You will kiss me, thinking that nobody is watching. This is a small town, Puti. Soon, there will be talks about us lesbians — is that what we are called? We don't have that word in our language.

I will take you for a fast ride in our jeepneys. It will feel as if we're airborne and highlights from your life and the faces of your loved ones will flash before you. You will hang on for dear life because we don't use seat belts. When fate says you die, you die, Puti. Let me teach you the value of life in the face of death.

When will you come, Puti? When you visit, I will book you in the elegant and historic Manila Hotel. If you have few dollars to spare, that's still perfectly okay. You can stay with my relatives in the city. They will not ask anything from you, but I suggest you bring chocolates and candies for the children, and scotch whiskey and Marlboros for the men. You need not bring anything for the women, for they will be happy that you remembered their kids and husbands. Certainly, lipsticks and perfumes will make them abashedly grateful.

You can come around May and partake of the fiestas. Our national coffers may be empty and we may be the world's poorest, but you will be amazed how we can yet come up with a feast. You can knock on any door and you will be fed.

If you really want me, Puti, take me now before the local elections next year. This is the season of blood and violence. How sure are you that I won't be hit by stray bullets meant for party leaders? Or bombed while watching a political campaign unfold? My breasts and pussy smashed to pieces before you even see them.

Once you decide to visit me, I will travel to Manila and meet you at the airport. I am enclosing my picture with this letter so you will recognize me. I have dark hair and eyes. Among a sea of strangers, I will look ordinary.

I will wave a card with your name, Puti. I will look plain and shy at first, but don't be frustrated. My English will be choppy. My o's will be u's. I will mix up my e's and i's. Manetuba, Wennepig, Nuva Scutia and Albirta.

When I say "Let's pack," you may think we're going on a holiday. I actually mean "Let's fuck." Soon you will understand my f's and p's. You laugh at my English, but try Pilipino. Puti means white. Puta is whore. Puto is rice cake. I might seem deaf to you, for I will always say, "Pardon?" It may be because you speak so quickly, Puti. Speak slowly, please. I must hear the nouns and verbs, for I cannot yet look in your eyes and read them. Give me ample time, Puti. Soon, I will know your needs before you even utter them.

Are you hungry? At breakfast, I will prepare boiled yam and plantain at your bedside. Or salted fish and rice porridge with cacao. I will make fresh spring rolls from young coconut shoots and, with it, a sweet garlic dip. You must be a meat-eater, Puti. On market day, I will buy fresh pork blood and innards, and make a stew. I will teach you to eat simple things such as sweet potato tops steamed with rice. And I will teach you another use for your fingers. We will eat with bare hands and not use forks and spoons. Once you have tasted my food, you will not go to any kitchen without remembering me, Puti. When we have eaten and the dishes need to be washed, I will say, "Leave them." Don't believe me, Puti. I really want to say "Sloth, make yourself useful!" Soon, you will understand why I keep my thoughts to myself.

Let me launder your clothes with my own hands. I will never let you go out with unpressed clothes, as if

you are without a woman. Let me iron everything, including your underwear. Let me wash your blonde, brown or red hair with googoo bark and calamansi. Let us bathe together in the hot springs of Pansol to loosen your joints hardened by harsh winters. Let me find out if you're also blonde, brown or red down there. Allow me to drape your naked body with sampaguita buds. On your nipples, I will rest two ylang ylang. I will clip two hibiscus on your hair and will admire your whiteness from the foot of the bed. Isn't it funny, Puti? How I walk in the shade or under an umbrella so I can be fair? And how you embarrass me by lying under the sun, so scantily covered, so you can be brown?

Oh, Puti, take me now. I have not even seen you, but I miss you already. Please, go to the embassy and take me now if they will let you. I have waited for you all my life. You do not know what suffering you inflict on me just by making me wait this long. Take me now. Once you have taken me to California or wherever, I will budget your money. Sometimes, it may seem like it doesn't add up. It's because I send money back home. Do you think I can live in comfort, while my family lives in squalor? Do you think I can eat the steak you broil and not think that it can feed my whole family. Why not take my family too, Puti? You will make me very happy. They are, after all, your family too.

They may say, "Damn her for going away with a tomboy." Actually, they will also think that I used my head. They will assume you're rich, Puti. Are you as rich as you are white? Do you own a car and a house? Or do

you just bike around the city like the poor pedicab drivers in our hometown?

Sometimes, you will find me crying as I listen to strange music from home. You will not understand it, Puti. Why I wish to leave this place and miss it too. It's my home, Puti. You can take me out of my country, but the Philippines will remain in my heart.

For giving me and my family a good life, I offer myself to you in servitude. Even after all the things I do for you, I may not hear any compliments. You will mock me, for I am risen from poverty. I will lack some of the finer things you may want in a woman. I may bore you with my silence. I may allow you to belittle me among your people. But treat me right among mine because my family will know your abuses and worry. They have suffered enough in life. You are my family too, Puti. A family is sacred.

Everyday your welfare will precede mine. I will take care of you as if you were my own child. I will make sure your back is dry from perspiration, and your shirt is changed, for I don't want you to get sick.

To your every sexual need, I will close my eyes in submission. Once I surrender myself to you — for I have waited for you all my life — don't make the mistake of desiring another woman. I warn you, I will leave you. I may have used you to escape the hard life I have known all my life, but I have chosen you from all the peoples of the world as my partner for life. I offer you my body and I expect complete loyalty from you. You may be ugly, sick, stubborn, obese, unclean and unloved among your own people, but I will take you.

From the day I give myself to you, I will think of nothing but how lucky I am that you, a vague impression of a Hollywood actress, have chosen me. I will thank God for you, Puti. But don't go astray, Puti. Maybe I will give you a second chance. Because you speak English so well, your rhetoric will fool me. You will convince me to take you back and blame me for your indiscretion. I will be very angry, but before I can translate my anger into words you understand, my feelings will dissipate. What you will hear me say will be milder and forgiving.

Why do you have to hurt me, Puti? I have allowed you into my body. I have let you suck my breasts. I have taken you inside me and allowed you to witness my throes of desires. I have devoted myself to you. I have given you a second chance and, again, you have fallen for another woman.

I will be calm and quiet. You may think I am over what you did. I will prepare a traditional English breakfast for you — two eggs, bacon, toast, jam and orange juice. You will think you have fooled me again. Once you drink your Tropicana, Puti, you will realize that I have poisoned you. You have fooled me, Puti. You wanted another woman. After all I have done for you. You tricked me. Oh Puti, I have not even met you, but already I want to poison you. I'm sorry.

I will call the police to confess my crime and they will put me in jail. In prison, I will meet a female cop who will remind me of my GI Jane, my dream come to life. She will fathom my thoughts and understand why I killed you. She will protect a fragile "Oriental" like me, locked among bigger heinous women. I will tell her not

to worry, for I have always dreamed of being shipwrecked on an island with only women survivors. I will tell her I am not sorry I poisoned you. Otherwise, I would not have met her. Oh, Puti, she treats me so well. I have not even met her, but already I'm crying out for joy.

A TV crew will come and ask for rights to my story. I will tell them my story, starting from my childhood when I showed off my blonde walking doll to my playmates, to the day I bought an insecticide and rat poison to mix with your Tropicana. I will tell enough to make a two-part series. Later on, they will say my life has human interest potential, but the network management will think the show cannot find sponsors because of the homosexual content and lack of a re-deeming social value.

They will suggest another plot about how, in the end, I will regret having fallen under the wrong influence of a lesbian hoodlum like you. They will portray you as a sadistic, jealous and overbearing woman who has threatened to kill me out of drunken possessiveness. I will be portrayed as the naive Filipina who dreamed of nothing but a comfortable life in a prosperous land. My lawyer, a handsome Harvard graduate with sympathy for Third World politics, will fall in love with me. He and I will kiss at the end.

I may have hated you, but I will never allow them to portray you as a wicked person. They will offer \$10,000 more for rights to my story. I will say, "Well, let me think about it."

So Puti, don't go astray. When you do it with another

woman, you will think that it is nothing serious. It will actually cost you your life. If you cannot in your heart promise that you will be faithful to me, don't answer this letter. It is not meant for you. Someday, somewhere, somedyke will read this letter and know in her heart that she is my Puti. Yes, you may think that I have overestimated my worth as if I had a twenty-four karat gold vagina encrusted with a diamond cunt. Oh yes, I do. Mine is the pearl of the orient seas, meant only for the mighty and true diver.

Love,
Luzviminda

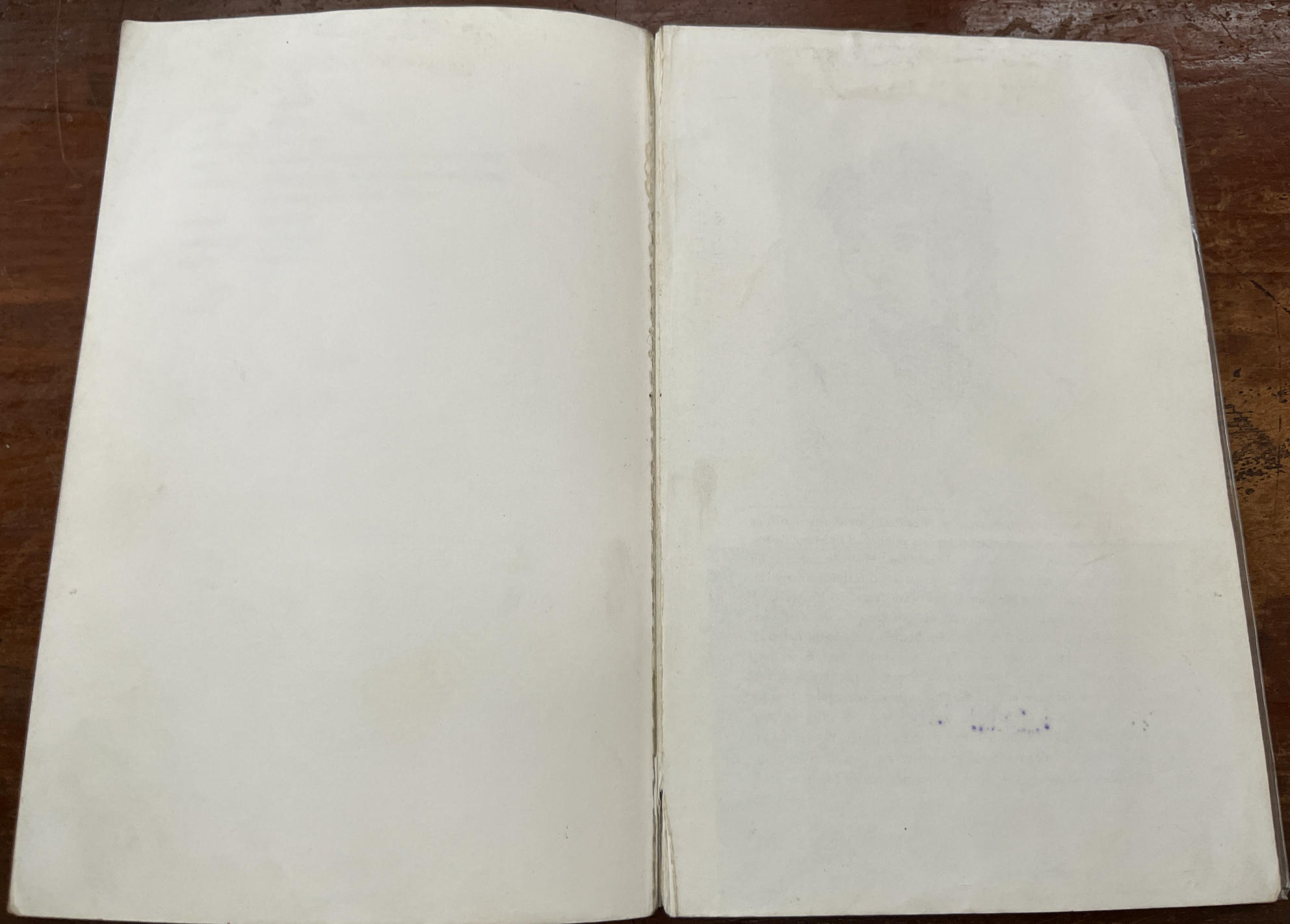
P.S.

The value of the dollar has risen to twenty-seven pesos this month (thirty pesos on the blackmarket). It might be wise to come now. I will be waiting for you.

GLOSSARY

<i>apo</i>	grandfather
<i>araykupu</i>	ouch
<i>balikbayan</i>	one who visits and returns to one's native country
<i>botellas</i>	bottles
<i>bruja</i>	witch
<i>calesa</i>	horse-drawn public transportation, also known as caritela
<i>cara y cruz</i>	toss coins
<i>caritela</i>	two-wheeled cart with a horse, also known as calesa
<i>cerveza</i>	beer
<i>cu'racha</i>	cockroach
<i>despedida</i>	farewell; departure; dismissal
<i>gago</i>	fool
<i>guapo</i>	handsome
<i>hija</i>	daughter
<i>ingrato</i>	ungrateful, thankless
<i>Kumusta</i>	(from the Spanish <i>¿Cómo está?</i>) How are you?
<i>kundiman</i>	classic Filipino love songs
<i>kuya</i>	elder brother
<i>maruya</i>	banana fritter
<i>naku</i>	an interjection similar to "oh"
<i>pards</i>	(from the Spanish <i>compadre</i>) pal

<i>pekpek</i>	vagina
<i>puta</i>	whore
<i>santisima</i>	most holy
<i>saya</i>	national costume for Filipino women
<i>señorita</i>	young lady. In reference to bananas, the short and small variety.
<i>soltero</i>	bachelor
<i>submarino</i>	submarine
<i>turista</i>	tourist





14

A CPA-turned-researcher-writer, Nice Rodriguez's first writings were trade and stock market reports published in Manila's top business newspapers. When labour unrest hit these papers, she tried feature writing in entertainment and lifestyle magazines. After oppositionist Benigno Aquino was shot dead, she created and drew *Marcial*, a daily anti-Marcos comic strip that was published in *Malaya* (Freedom). She became a photojournalist at the outset of the People Power Revolution in the Philippines that toppled the twenty-year Marcos dictatorship. She studied painting at the University of the Philippines. Before migrating to Canada in 1988, she was an assistant section editor of the *Philippine Daily Globe*. She now works as production artist at Toronto's *NOW* magazine. Her stories have appeared in *Piece of My Heart* and *Afterglow: More Stories of Lesbian Desire*.

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